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Attracting international students: equitable services and support, campus cohesion and community engagement

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Attracting international students: equitable services and support, campus cohesion and community engagement



Equality Challenge Unit

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Researched and written by a team from the Centre for Education for Racial Equality in Scotland, University of Edinburgh and the Centre for Remote and Rural Studies, University of Highlands and Islands led by Dr Rowena Arshad and Dr Philomena de Lima.

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Attracting international students:

Equitable services and support, campus cohesion and community engagement

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Foreword

There should be no doubt that attracting international students is a big issue for Scotland, and the UK more generally. Last year, nearly 45,000 international students were studying in Scotland, making up 20 per cent of our student population.

International students are drawn to UK universities for a variety of reasons including specialist courses and the chance to learn in a world-renowned institution. International students come here for the opportunity to find out about our culture and people, and in the hopes of an all-round excellent experience on campus.

I am delighted that ECU have commissioned this research into how well Scottish institutions are providing international students with such an experience through specific support initiatives and also taking into account wider issues of campus cohesion and engagement with local communities. There is much here to be proud of.

We can, however, be doing more to ensure that the student experience that we provide puts us at the forefront of attracting and retaining students from overseas and all the benefits (intellectual and intercultural as well as financial) that they bring to our campuses, communities, and countries.

We need to make sure that we understand our students' different backgrounds and cultures, and that we can develop our support to match this diversity. This research highlights needs that we may not have been meeting, for example supporting international students with disabilities (especially with mental health disclosure). Specific careers support for international students, in Scotland and on return to their home countries, will help students to succeed beyond their time at our institutions.

We also have a wider role to play, and the improvements recommended by this study have a wider impact than on individual student experiences. Facilitating meaningful interaction between all students on campus will benefit the whole institution; equipping all our students to live and work in an increasingly global environment.

This report suggests ways to evolve our institutional cultures and consolidate our relations with our communities and wider society. I hope that higher education institutions will seize on this exciting opportunity to be at the forefront of attracting international students.



Professor Dame Joan Stringer
Principal and Vice-chancellor
Edinburgh Napier University

1 Introduction

In an increasingly competitive international market, higher education institutions (HEIs) are adopting various strategies to attract talented students from overseas.

World rankings aside, word of mouth is probably one of the most effective marketing tools for encouraging students to consider a particular HEI. The messages that students take back to their countries about their experience of student services should be an important consideration of any HEI's internationalisation strategy.

Previous ECU research investigated how providing an inclusive environment for all students can result in increased attraction, retention and achievement of international students.

ECU (2011) *Joining up agendas: internationalisation and equality and diversity in higher education*
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/joining-up-agendas

In autumn 2010, ECU developed a project in collaboration with Scottish HEIs to look further into how advancing equality and diversity can support the internationalisation agenda.

Through assisting the development of inclusive practice for both international and UK students, the project also identifies ways in which the sector can ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010. The recommendations of this report align with the ambitions of this legislation and will support HEIs in their delivery of inclusive provision for international and UK students.

Further information on current equality legislation is available on the ECU website www.ecu.ac.uk/subjects/equality-act-2010

1.1 The research

Equality and diversity practitioners from the Scottish sector highlighted three areas of importance for consideration:

- = the equity of support and professional services between international and UK students
- = campus cohesion – the relationship between international and UK students, between staff and international students and the ways in which institutions support good relations
- = community engagement – how international students engage with local communities and how institutions encourage this

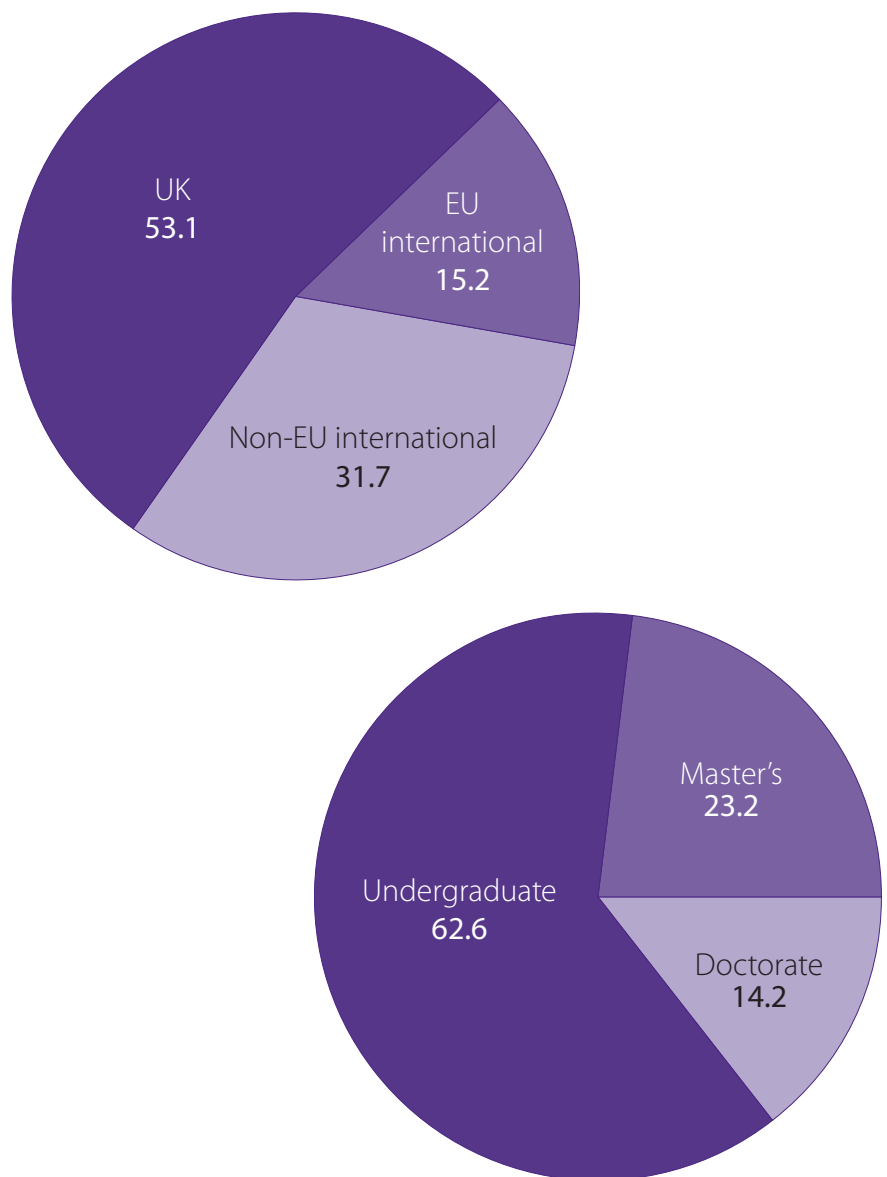
The research aimed to identify good practice and transferable learning, and provide recommendations for developing practice in these areas, focusing on the support services deemed most relevant by the project advisory group.

Respondent breakdown

Through an online questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and discussion groups, undergraduate and postgraduate EU and non-EU international students and UK students – and staff members from targeted services – participated in the research:

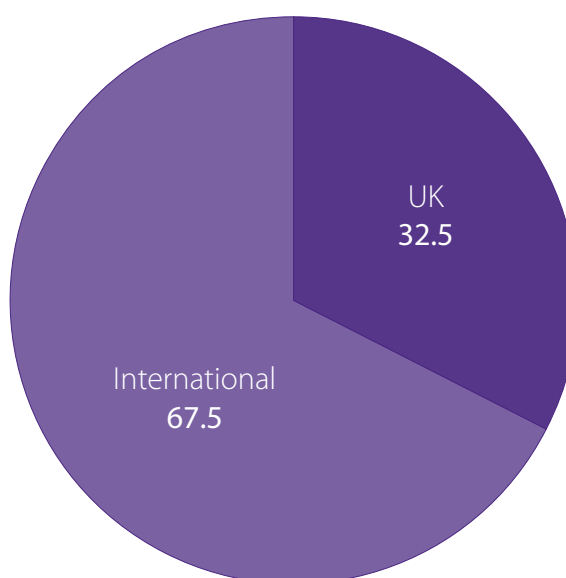
- = 965 responses from students from five HEIs were drawn between May and October 2011 of which 55 per cent came from one HEI where the survey was actively promoted

Nationality and level of study of survey respondents



- = 71 staff members took part in interviews – staff held a range of positions and worked in different services (see appendix for full details)
- = 199 students took part in group discussions – the balance of UK, EU and non-EU undergraduate and postgraduate students varied between institutions

Nationality of focus group participants



A full profile of student respondents can be found in the appendix.

1.2 Using this report

This report uses the term 'international' to mean EU and non-EU students. Any distinctions made are explicitly mentioned.

Based on the research, this report makes a number of recommendations for HEIs. However, it is important to bear in mind that not all recommendations may be applicable for all institutions. Issues are frequently affected by broader contextual factors, of which there are examples overleaf, including:

- = the size and profile of the student population
- = geographic location of institution
- = partnerships with particular industries and international academic institutions
- = evolving UK legislation

Student profile

An institution that caters largely for UK undergraduates may choose to prioritise accommodation for undergraduate rather than postgraduate students. This decision may have more of an impact on international postgraduates, and particularly those with families, than UK postgraduates.

Geographic location

Geographical location can influence the experiences students have of local communities (eg, some HEIs are located in largely monocultural areas while others are situated in areas of greater diversity). This will have an impact on the range of community organisations, services and networks that an HEI might be able to work with or call upon to support students.

Partnerships

Small institutions, to ensure economies of scale, might form partnerships with larger institutions to cover the range of services that students require. Therefore these institutions might have a more limited control over their support services.

Some institutions offer specialist courses and will develop particular relationships with the sectors their programmes are working in. They may find that this affects the students they recruit, and there may be a large number from a certain country. This may enable them to develop more specific support for students, for example by the careers service.

Evolving UK legislation

Another overarching factor affecting all HEIs at present are changes in United Kingdom Borders Agency (UKBA) requirements. Evolving immigration and visa rules have meant that HEIs have had to be quick to respond to legislative requirements.

Staff respondents were concerned that the focus on meeting UKBA requirements has a real potential of diverting resources away from day-to-day student support.

In a couple of cases, international students raised concerns with the restrictions UKBA places on the numbers of hours they would be eligible to work, which they deemed unfair.

2 Equity of support services to all students

A key focus of this study was to find out whether services are provided equitably to international and UK students.

Being equitable does not mean providing the same for every student but recognising the different needs within a diverse group and making necessary steps to ensure that services are provided in a way that meets these needs as far as possible.

Interviews with staff at the six HEIs highlighted the level of effort that has been made by different services to provide quality and efficiency for international and UK students. The majority of students interviewed and surveyed were satisfied with the range and quality of support services provided by institutions. Services are provided equitably for international and UK students in most cases, though each service area identified in this study has room for improvement to ensure greater equity of provision.

This section provides a commentary on the following services identified by the project advisory group.

- = Accommodation service
- = Careers service
- = Catering
- = Chaplaincy
- = Disability service
- = Finance
- = Health
- = Sport, leisure and exercise
- = Students' unions and associations
- = Support for international students with dependants

The recommendations will be relevant to the service area in question, but will also have implications for other areas of the institution and senior management.

2.1 All services

International students particularly valued:

- = receiving information about the institution and its services alongside course information, particularly in hard copy
- = pre-entry information and advice, for example: pre-arrival briefings, a dedicated section on the institution's website for international students, information related to key services (such as access to an international student calculator and information on how to set up a bank account)
- = the meet and greet service at airports and on arrival at the HEI
- = advice on available support for improving English language skills
- = advice on study skills and social customs
- = availability of cultural and faith support services on campus

However, students interviewed in the study were not always aware of the various support services in their HEI. This was attributed to an overload of information about services at the beginning of the academic year and uncertainty about what the service provides and its relevance for them personally.

'What I don't really know is what the student welfare service is. I would think that that would be something more for local, home students ... You know, when I see the word 'welfare' I think of welfare system ... I wouldn't think that it's something for me.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

Staff cited information overload, particularly during freshers' and induction week, as an area that needs immediate attention. They indicated that students should be reminded throughout the year of the range of support services available and be offered a clear explanation of what each service can offer. Staff were beginning to consider how to address the overload and provide ongoing updates and advice.

Improving communication between support services

Despite a high level of effort from different services to provide efficient, good-quality support for international and UK students, communication between services could be improved to maximise support efforts. The highly devolved nature of services in larger institutions may be a barrier to consistent, transparent provision. If there is no well-developed referral system between services, students may find themselves being passed from one service to another.

Staff acknowledged that the devolution of some support services ensures that students can access services in different areas of the HEI campus, close to where they study. However certain key services, such as immigration advice, need to be centralised. Despite the potential impersonal feel, centralisation results in a more efficient and accurate service for students.

Closer working across services facilitates the sharing of good practice and creative initiatives, while avoiding duplication of work. There is an urgent need for HEIs to review the way services work together so that the overall student experience can be enhanced. This should include consideration of ways to distribute information to students throughout the academic year and of ways to ensure that academic staff are well aware of the range of support services for students.

Freshers' week

The start of academic life is filled with a large number of activities from academic departments, support services, the chaplaincy, the students' union, English language centres and student societies. Student services, the students' association and the athletic union at the University of St Andrew's coordinate a freshers' week programme that pulls together essential and recommended activities for students, including specific activities for postgraduates, in one brochure.

Within the brochure, events are clearly listed by day using a coded system with venue and timings. A map of the university with numbered buildings and a street plan is included in the middle of the brochure, which can be pulled out for future use.

Listing these events in one brochure gives students a sense of partnership between these different arms of student services.

Co-location of services

Heriot-Watt University redesigned the layout of its services along a corridor akin to an underground shopping mall. This student support services hub hosts the following support offices as well as spaces available for meetings and individual sessions:

- = accommodation service
- = counselling and support service
- = disability service
- = finance
- = international student adviser office

The central position of the international office encourages students to make use of other services. The proximity of services enables better communication and synergies to develop between them.

Alongside these support services, the hub also contains a bank, hairdressing services, a bookshop, student advice, the students' union shop and eating places. This mixture gives the whole area an accessible and friendly buzz.

Student induction and experience coordination group

The University of Edinburgh has set up a group of a range of academic and support services to prioritise work to roll out in a systematic and coherent way.

The group has worked on a number of initiatives, including:

- = supporting postgraduate international students who are here with families and dependants
- = identifying 'buddy systems' in use across the university to consider the most effective practices to extend
- = developing a postgraduate induction website

Recommendation

- = Assess the effectiveness of communication between student services to avoid duplication and improve the efficiency of responding to international and UK student needs.

2.2 Accommodation service

Accommodation services provide information about available accommodation and other related services including:

- = advice on accommodation
- = dealing with the application process
- = marketing
- = issuing and managing leases
- = working with the private rental sector
- = responding to students' welfare and pastoral issues
- = helping students make the transition from home to HEI accommodation or external rented accommodation

Some HEIs are exploring ways to provide accommodation information online in a format that will enable prospective students to explore the accommodation facilities using a virtual tour. Staff indicated that this could be accompanied by clearer advice on the suitability of accommodation buildings and information on their position in relation to other institutional areas.

Some HEIs in this study provide a 'cooling off' period of seven days. This allows students who are unable to view the accommodation prior to commencing studies to make a decision on the accommodation allocated to them after they have arrived. International students found this particularly helpful.

Students were generally satisfied with accommodation services and facilities.

'It's really safe and it's really central which is, I think, important especially when you first arrive and you don't kind of know what's going on.'

International postgraduate

Allocation of accommodation

Some students and staff perceived some HEIs in Scotland to operate an informal 'segregation' policy, despite the fact that none of the HEIs in this study have such a policy.

Staff acknowledged that at times they are constrained by the need to ensure full occupancy and meet financial targets. The UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) advises that difficulties can be minimised by maximising transparency of the services and minimising the potential gap between expectation and reality.

Accommodation services may need to work harder to reassure international students that they are not being segregated. Some international and UK students in focus groups were under the impression that some nationality groups were deliberately housed together as part of an inclusion imperative. These students were critical of any such policy and thought attempts to group international students to make them feel included or comfortable was naïve.

Activities

Students appreciate the events and activities organised by accommodation services which enable students to feel at home quickly. This is particularly true for international postgraduate students who might only be in their programme of study for a year.

Events include evenings where students can bring dishes to swap and share recipes, movie nights where popcorn and soft drinks were on offer and 'Come dine with me'-type activities between flats where people could mix. Events organised by HEI accommodation services were often alcohol-free or had minimal alcohol.

'In the events we run across the board, we have very little alcohol involved. This is a very deliberate policy on our part, partly to try to educate and partly to try to move away from the notion that you can't have fun without having a drink.'

Staff member

Students also mentioned how some accommodation services organised cultural festivals and events and outings such as celebrating Chinese New Year by going to local Chinese restaurants.

The role of accommodation staff

Wardens and resident coordinators are considered valuable by both staff and students. These individuals help to shape the ethos of the residential block they are assigned to and some accommodation service managers stressed that they took great care to select the right person for these roles.

'We're looking for some understanding of the difficulties that students might face and we're also looking for some sort of understanding of what the resolution to some of these problems might be. They are by and large the first port of call for students who live here. And we need to be able to deal with whatever happens and then be able to help the students and point them in the right direction.'

Staff member

The online survey indicated that international students appreciate the presence of a warden and feel comfortable about approaching their warden with concerns. Some of the students who took part in the focus group had been wardens themselves and they empathised with accommodation staff, recognising that the role of warden is challenging due to the need to consider a range of cultural and diversity-related issues.

'Some [students] don't even like to be in the same room. It's really challenging ... but then you can't separate cultural groups into certain flats ... cause you are creating a ghetto. Well ghetto is probably the wrong word but you are creating these divisions ... You've got to take all that into account. And at the end of the day remember that they're here to study but also here to have fun. You're not here to be a prison warden and say "don't do this, don't do that".'

UK postgraduate

Accommodation services staff stated that they work hard to provide a feeling of home where students can feel safe and supported, particularly as they are more likely to be productive learners in this environment. Domestic staff members may be the first to pick up on loneliness, isolation or health issues which they then alert the wardens about.

'Domestic staff are very good at highlighting to us if they think there is an issue. They see a student who is never up, does not go to class, has take-away packets in the bin every night when they are on a catered option, what's that about?'

Staff member

Gender and disability considerations

Single-gender occupancy was not mentioned by staff or students, although when asked about this, staff generally indicated that there are women-only floors or that women are allocated rooms above ground floor level for safety reasons. While most accommodation staff discussed the need to be sensitive about visitors staying overnight, most appeared to depend on the wardens or janitors to ensure some boundaries were placed on the number of nights a visitor could stay and so on.

One student indicated that there was insufficient information about accommodation provision for disabled students from the HEI's accommodation services. There was information available from the disability office's website but the information was not easily accessible.

'There is good information on the disability office website, but you have to know to look for it. There was extremely poor information on accommodation and local services for disabled students from the accommodation service.'

UK undergraduate

Private accommodation

Some institutions make arrangements with private companies to manage university properties. There are also some large private sector providers of student accommodation. There is an important issue here about whether HEIs' contracts with private sector providers ensure the same level of adherence to equality policies (see ECU's *Handbook for student accommodation providers: support and guidance for equality and diversity*).

Staff indicated that advice is offered on tenancy and contractual rights to those who take up private sector option. However, students felt the advice and information about private lets should be improved.

‘When I first came it was the beginning of September and I couldn’t find any place [at the university]. And then you have to go outside and go through the headache of finding a flat or something. So it would be great if there was like ... one website that could connect the two worlds together or something.’

Non-EU international postgraduate

Particular suggestions include:

- = ensuring that the private lettings are of a good standard and in safe areas
- = providing information on accommodation that is suitable for families, with easy access to schools
- = developing a standards charter with private sector landlords to act responsibly and not exploit international students, for example, by not returning deposits

International students raised issues they had regarding the level of support they received from accommodation services to find private accommodation, which led to increased expenses.

‘I was never even sent an email. I had to look for a flat myself and I had to do it from home. A little bit more assistance could have helped, like a person to contact. I couldn’t even come here and see that accommodation. So I had to just kind of pick one and if I didn’t want to stay then I don’t know what to do.’

Non-EU international postgraduate

Aside from information of where to seek suitable accommodation, international students wanted information that affects day-to-day living, for example, about council tax and how to keep safe, as well as general information about neighbourhoods.

‘We all come from different backgrounds, different ways of, I don’t know, dealing with things. So we don’t know how is the Scottish way ... So it would be important to know all details like [house of multiple occupancy] licence or council tax ... it’s all new for us.’

Non-EU international postgraduate

The UKCISA benchmarking survey of international students for 2010/11 (currently unavailable publicly) showed a clear difference in the way that HEIs in the UK approach the matter of private sector lets. For example, only 18 per cent of HEI and college respondents in Scotland indicated that they considered private sector options for students compared with 49 per cent in England and 38 per cent in Wales. Only 29 per cent of respondents in Scotland indicated they provide advice on housing rights compared with 67 per cent in England and 75 per cent in Wales.

Recommendations

Accommodation service information

- = Provide detailed online information about accommodation to allow students who are not able to visit accommodation prior to application to form a clearer understanding of the types of accommodation available, for example 360-degree virtual tours of residences, photos, floor plans and information about the location of the property in relation to other institutional services.
- = As far as possible, provide reassurance that international students will not be segregated from UK students.
- = Provide students with information about the various accreditation schemes that exist at national and local level.

See, for example www.ukcisa.org.uk/student/info_sheets/accommodation_overview.php#accred

- = Provide training on cultural awareness and challenging discrimination to staff and volunteers (from managers to domestic and janitorial staff) associated with accommodation services.
- = Organise house-hunting events to provide students with information about what to look for and be aware of when seeking accommodation.

The University of Portsmouth has an example www.port.ac.uk/studentlife/accommodation/privatehousing/househuntingevents

- = Work with other services in the institution and external agencies, such as local voluntary sector organisations and faith and cultural groups, to provide a range of activities (eg, alcohol-free events), particularly for postgraduate students with families.

HEI-owned accommodation

- = Provide more family flats as part of the HEI-managed accommodation.
- = Offer short-lease tenancies.
- = Consider other equality and diversity implications of service provision, for example, ensure that accommodation is suitable for people with a specific impairment or a certain religion.
- = Review the role of wardens or resident coordinators to ensure they are proactive in providing opportunities to assist integration and have the knowledge, skills and confidence to address issues of prejudice or discrimination.

Private accommodation

- = Provide clear housing and tenancy rights advice and a vetting service of private sector lets to assist students with their selection of accommodation and enable them to enter into contracts with confidence.
- = Provide students with information about any existing deposit protection scheme.

The Scottish Government has an example
www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/privaterent/government/SGTD1/FAQtenants

- = Explore the availability of family flats and be mindful of safety issues (eg, avoid areas where students might be exposed to overt racism, bigotry and harassment), proximity to schools and public transport routes, and travelling costs when selecting premises.

Further reading

- = ECU (2009) *Handbook for student accommodation providers: support and guidance for equality and diversity*
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/student-accommodation-providers-handbook
- = Scottish Government FAQs: tenants. Online resource.
www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/privaterent/government/SGTD1/FAQtenants
- = UKCISA (2010) *Managing accommodation for international students: a handbook for practitioners*
www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/material_media/good_practice_guides.php
- = UKCISA Accommodation for international students: an overview. Online resource.
www.ukcisa.org.uk/student/info_sheets/accommodation_overview.php
- = UKCISA What you need to know when choosing accommodation. Online resource.
www.ukcisa.org.uk/student/info_sheets/accommodation_things_to_know.php

2.3 Careers service

International and UK students were generally satisfied with the level of service provided by careers services, in particular the combination of one-to-one support, sessions, talks and workshops involving both internal staff and external speakers. The HEIs in this study have dedicated pages on their websites to provide advice to international students about working in the UK as well as local volunteering opportunities.

'I used [careers advice] when I was getting a job and I did get one which was good. And also they are really informative and they will help you with anything you want ... if you just want them to look over your CV or personal statement or they have information on a tonne of stuff and you can use their computers.'

EU international undergraduate

To identify areas for improvements or consolidation for all students, careers staff draw on feedback from internal surveys or graduate surveys.

To develop discipline-relevant provision, careers staff reported partnership working with academic programmes and subject areas, though this is frequently ad hoc and dependent on the goodwill or commitment of faculty staff. Methods for delivering industry or discipline-specific career advice, such as specific teams, are also being considered, with questions of the balance between centralised and devolved advisers being raised.

International student use of services

Careers service staff described international students as heavy users of the careers service with regard to:

- = accessing information
- = finding part-time employment opportunities
- = CV checking

One respondent indicated that over 50 per cent of their time was taken up advising and assisting international students in employment areas that UK students would either take for granted or have other sources and networks to access for advice. Several staff respondents suggested that perhaps too little time was spent encouraging UK students to consider careers and employability issues.

In one HEI, staff indicated that North American students were the least demanding of careers services and as a consequence they concentrated their efforts on students making more demands on the service or who had fewer visa restrictions. Another HEI, which carried out research to find out why North American students were not using the careers services as much, found that North American students heading home thought that the careers service would be unable to assist them. This information led the careers service to strengthen connections with the alumni team so that 'back at base' opportunities could be formalised and opened up to returning North American students. These opportunities include mentoring about career opportunities for current students and recent graduates from former graduates, in some cases using tools such as Facebook to accelerate the process.

Staff recognised the need to enable closer working with other service areas, such as the international office which has expertise on visa and immigration matters, to advise on employment and internship opportunities that depend on visa conditions.

Staff were uncertain whether a generic careers service would be able to meet the needs of all students. In one HEI there was an attempt to embed international issues into general service provision, but concerns were raised over whether this approach would dilute the needs of international students.

Managing expectations

Careers staff stressed the importance of understanding a student's cultural context to tailor the advice and service to the student's needs. Specialised attention to the career needs of different groups and nationalities was more fruitful than a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, some students might wish to have more structured work experience and internship opportunities, while others require advice and support on how to apply for work.

'In general the expectations differ. For example, you know if you have American students, they would be expecting to work on campus because traditionally in America quite a lot of campus opportunities occur ... so it's very much about pointing them to where it does happen and broadening out their horizons, saying

“well actually if you want to work in [city name] one of the best places is ...” Another example is that sometimes we have Chinese students who are very anxious about language issues and dealing with the local accent. So again it’s about kind of approaching that and building their confidence.’

Staff member

‘International students are increasingly wanting to find out how successful students from particular courses and universities are in gaining employment once graduating. So they are asking, what happened to the international students before I invest my £20,000 or whatever. So it would be in the university’s interest to obtain this type of information.’

Staff member

Of the small number of students who indicated that they were not satisfied with the careers service, 58 per cent of these were international students. Careers staff believed this was often due to international students’ employment expectations which could be challenging to meet.

‘Students come in here with an expectation that yes there is a global oil and gas industry out there. But the challenge for us is how do we actually prepare them for when they leave with the skills that employers will take in.’

Staff member

The following reasons were cited by students as a cause for their dissatisfaction:

- = they were unaware of the range of support provided by the careers service, for example how to create a CV**
- = the careers service was perceived to be less relevant for postgraduates**
- = international students who wanted to work in Scotland felt more could be done to help them create a more ‘Scotland-focused’ CV**
- = there was a view that the careers service is not sufficiently internationally focused, or only relevant for EU students**

'I feel that maybe some of their programmes could be better tailored to suit international students ... I am referring more to non-EU students. So I have been to some career information sessions. And there was one last year and it was about how to create a good academic CV. A lot of the advice, even though they were useful they were more specific and perhaps targeted towards the EU and home students. It was hard to visualise how they would apply in my context.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

Some students felt that the careers service provides more than it tells students, and that there is a communication and information gap.

'I think they provide a lot of services they don't even really make clear they provide. Because when I went in to get their help about a job interview they said "oh by the way we have a big book of feedback forms for people who have been so you can look up a specific company and get the specific feedback on the company you are applying for". And I was like "that is really good idea" but I never heard about it.'

EU international postgraduate

Career support methods

Many HEIs take part in the range of initiatives offered through the workplace experience programme for international students and annual virtual careers fairs from the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services Scotland.

Careers services and academic programmes have also embraced the matter of employability in a number of other ways:

- = mock assessments and interviews to help students develop strategies and interview techniques
- = course-focused career events, lectures and workshops facilitated by internal speakers and external employers

International students at Robert Gordon University have found programmes where students are placed within an industry context to undergo assessment centre selection processes particularly useful. Participation and presentation are critiqued and suggestions are made on how participants can improve. Students have found these to be realistic and helpful to fine-tune the skills and dispositions that make for more successful interviews and assessment.

The master's extra programme at the University of St Andrews runs events alongside taught master's programmes. Attendance at events is voluntary but can earn credit points towards a certificate in career development, which students find a useful addition to their CV. www.st-andrews.ac.uk/management/programmes/pgtaught/mx

Allocation of opportunities

The issue of perceived inequity in how part-time paid jobs or tutoring opportunities are allocated within HEIs is something to which institutions need to be alert.

Staff indicated that some employers, particularly small companies, are reluctant to work with employees whose first language is not English, or invest in a student they believe will leave in under two years.

Links with employers and job centres

UK students see local job centres to be more effective than HEI careers services. Some students suggested that their careers service should signpost students to job centres, advise them to consider handing CVs to shops on the high street and create better links with local employers. Links with employers were seen as crucial in providing graduate employment opportunities. Some international students expected institutions to provide better opportunities for networking with graduate employers.

'I thought that, since it is a top university in the UK, I would see the university having links with various private sector enterprises and companies, have exposure to the people from the industrial sector, which I think this university lacks ... Not just organising seminars within the university but going beyond that.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

Funding

The need for greater investment in personnel for the careers services was seen as critical if the service is to fully meet its obligations to international and UK students and as student expectations of these services increase.

Recommendations

Careers service organisation

- = Consider whether the level of funding and organisation of careers services provides a balance between central and devolved advice and generic and industry-specific provision.
- = Review equity in support provision for non-EU international students in terms of placement, internship and job opportunities whether here in the UK or back in their home country.

Institutional work opportunities

- = Ensure transparency of recruitment and selection of students for part-time jobs or tutoring opportunities within the HEI.

Cross-departmental working

- = Embed closer working between academic departments and career services to promote graduate attributes and employability.
- = Review how effectively different student support services within an institution work together, such as the international office and the careers services to facilitate opportunities for international students with graduate employability requirements with visa conditions attached.

Approaching employers

- = Work more closely with local employers and bodies such as the local Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Scottish Confederation of British Industries to consider internship and employment opportunities for international students.
- = Work alongside the HEI's international office to inform employers on situations affecting international students to break any stereotypes or fears relating to diversity, language, faith and culture.

Further reading

- = AGCAS Starting your career in – country guides for international students. Online resource.
www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/132-Starting-Your-Career-In-Country-Guides-for-International-Students
- = HECSU (2005) *Careers advisory services and international students*
www.hecsu.ac.uk/assets/assets/documents/CASIS_full_report.pdf
- = NASES More than work. Online resource.
www.nases.org.uk/students/content/234963/international_students
- = NASES Prime minister's initiative. Online resource.
nases.org.uk/content/22962/research_and_publications/prime_ministers_initiative_2
- = UKCISA Working in the UK after your studies. Online resource.
www.ukcisa.org.uk/student/working_after.php

2.4 Catering

Food was acknowledged by numerous respondents as being a resource that could assist social gatherings and bring people together. However, staff and students' union representatives felt that the catering provision at their institution was not diverse enough to meet the dietary needs and palates of students.

'It is not about the food needs of one individual, it is how we approach the issue for the whole institution. So if you have diverse people on campus, I think diverse cuisines does play a part. I don't buy the soups there. Everybody goes on about the wonderful homemade soup they provide. I asked if there was vegetarian soup and I said 'what stock do you use?' One uses ham, the other uses pork in vegetarian soup. The good thing at least they were honest enough to admit that. The downside is I don't think most people will ask. Vegetarian is vegetarian.'

Staff member

'The lack of diversity forces people to self-cater and then they don't mix and then they get blamed for sticking together.'

Staff member

Staff suggested that catering managers should be more proactive and creative in considering different cuisines, for example providing more rice-based meals. They wanted to see greater food diversity offered on campus and for hospitality functions. More than one respondent suggested the idea of a global food court which was well received during a subsequent test on staff respondents from the range of HEIs.

'I think their view is that they would do various types of food if there was a demand for it ... and they don't think there is a demand for a huge range of things.'

Staff member

Students, despite usually self-catering, raised a number of issues with campus catering when prompted, including criticism of the quality of food, the high prices, the opening hours and the canteen space.

'It's over-priced and the food isn't that good quality.'

EU international postgraduate

'On campus you can't get food anywhere past seven or eight. Which if you've been out ... say you've been for a day out or been away on field trips and have come back to uni at six or seven ... by the time you've had a shower it's eight or nine o'clock. So now you can't get food anywhere.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

Some students expressed dissatisfaction with the limited diversity of the food provided.

'I never used their cafeteria and never found anything suitable for vegetarians. So that is something that can be improved ... Even the issue of religious students because it's a matter of their faith ... I mean so for vegetarians they should also give separate utensils.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

'For catering I would have preferred if they put into common sense when there are different cultures here and not just do white food or like they could incorporate African ... Not just British kind of food.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

'I don't need an en suite, I don't need a double bed: I need food. I hated it.'

EU international undergraduate

Where vegetarian and halal foods were routinely provided, students expressed appreciation.

'Culture, I don't think that exists on this campus. Halal, there might be the odd sandwich, perhaps, if you are lucky enough to find one on that day. The students' union shop is more up to speed and more diverse.'

UK undergraduate

Food on a budget

Glasgow School of Art offers a cookery class once a month in the staff canteen for all students. The school saw this as a good way of encouraging students to integrate while providing an opportunity for students with families to meet each other.

Initially the class was called 'international flavours', however it was rebranded to 'food on a budget' when the original name failed to attract UK students who assumed that it was not for them.

'It was basically saying ... come and cook a dish from your country or whatever you fancy'

Students bring ingredients, which they are reimbursed for, though they may also just watch if they prefer. The chef stays to keep an eye to ensure health and safety. Once everyone has cooked everyone shares the meal.

The cookery class provided a place for students with families to meet, while giving an opportunity for students to share cultures through food and address issues of budgeting.

Recommendations

- = Review menus and increase the provision of foods from different cuisines which would enable the service to better meet cultural, ethical and religious diversities.
- = Provide frequent and up-to-date training for catering staff in meeting standards for diverse clients. For example, how to ensure that halal food is prepared without cross-contamination and developing awareness of why it is important to label, segregate and cover foods.
- = Consider involving minority ethnic communities or local cafes/ restaurants in the vicinity of the HEI to assist with training or the supplying of ingredients and catering options.

2.5 Chaplaincy

Staff and students rated the chaplaincy highly as an accessible resource. Respondents appreciated that activities in the centre are largely alcohol free. The commitment to a multi-faith approach has enabled students from a range of beliefs and backgrounds to integrate at the centre. Some chaplaincies advertise their activities in a number of the main languages spoken around campus. Chaplaincies have good working links with different religious and belief leaders from external organisations and within the local communities, and provide support structures for international and UK students and staff throughout the academic year.

'I was speaking to the chaplain and he said we have an international student befriending scheme. So students who can't go back home for Christmas, one because you might not celebrate Christmas back home, or two affordability, or three you are too busy to travel to and fro, we have an international befriending scheme. You don't have to spend Christmas day on your own. The student can take part in everything except the religious service. So I joined in and sat down next to students from Thailand, China and elsewhere. It was really good inclusion.'

Staff member

Chaplaincies also provide support in practical areas such as passing on cooking utensils from previous international student cohorts for new international students, running cookery courses using ingredients you can buy in Scottish supermarkets, helping students to manage budgets and so forth.

'[Leaving students] don't want to take their pots and pans home because they're all worried about weight for their plane. So we invite them to donate it and then at the start of next semester we farm it out to ... well it is to international students actually because we feel the Brits can manage themselves.'

Staff member

International students identified that the chaplaincy not only provides a quiet place suitable for reading and studying, but also a place they can socialise and meet people irrespective of religion.

'I like the chaplaincy during exam time because it offers a very quiet space so it is an alternative study place. And there are tea and coffees.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

'I think the churches here are doing a very good job integrating people ... a really good place.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

Many chaplaincy centres offer multicultural food evenings to encourage mixing between international and UK students which had proven to be popular events.

Recommendations

- = Chaplaincies are highly valued by international students and are a key venue to support integration. HEIs should build and consolidate this provision further in promoting good relations between international and UK students.

2.6 Disability service

The disability service advises students on their support requirements and builds individual student learning profiles for all students who have declared a disability. Student support assistants are provided for both international and UK students.

Use of the disability service

The majority of student respondents were unaware of the services of the disability office. This was perhaps not unexpected, given that under 3.5 per cent (3 per cent of online respondents and 5 per cent of 120 focus group participants) declared a disability. Student focus groups highlighted a need to raise postgraduate and international student awareness of the disability service. However, both international and UK students who do use the service were satisfied with the quality of care and advice.

'I've had to use a lot of the disability support because I'm dyspraxic and I've had mental health issues with depression over the last couple of years. And I've found them really good. I've had appointments quite frequently with them and counselling and stuff ... immediately upon getting to my university, I had an appointment with them and they set up extra time for essays and stuff. And that was very helpful.'

UK undergraduate

A staff member stated they had not proactively targeted their services at international students due to the high demand on staff time from UK students. They were concerned about whether the needs of disabled non-EU international students were being adequately met. Staff indicated that EU students were most likely to seek advice and support. However, respondents were aware that there are other complexities such as different cultural views and understanding of various disabilities that they were not sure they had the knowledge capacity or time to address.

'We would like to take the service to international students maybe more than we're able to do at the moment ... whether you can actually effectively break down a cultural barrier around something like dyslexia in a year, an international student's year ... who knows. I think that's possibly a bigger job than we're able to take on.'

Staff member

Funding for international students

International students do not have statutory funding equivalent to the UK government's disabled students' allowance (DSA). As a result, when they enter an institution they may not receive the rigorous needs assessment linked to this funding provided for eligible UK students, which could result in opportunities for support being missed.

'While of course we do something, it's much more informal. But it's not perhaps as stringent as it might be and if we are talking about equity in service provision, then maybe it should be. And I've been thinking to myself of late well that's not really how we should be approaching this.'

Staff member

At present, individual HEIs fund any support that an international student requires. This ensures the HEI upholds the values of the Equality Act 2010. In one HEI, the majority of the money from the disabled students support fund provided by the Scottish Funding Council is used to support international students.

Staff providing disability support services highlighted the need for more resources to support international disabled students.

'We can't just be going full steam ahead and say this is our strategy for attracting international students without recognising the amount of support that these students need or are entitled to.'

Staff member

This difference in provision did not go unnoticed among disabled students.

'[The disability service is] really good. They've helped because I've got a visual impairment. So they've helped me to get computer equipment and specialist programmes. And also they've helped me with the library to get electronic books and stuff like that ... so it's made a big difference but I don't know how ... foreign students have found it. Because like they managed to get funding to get me stuff from the DSA. But I know there's a girl in my class from Taiwan. And she wasn't able to get so much because they couldn't get funding to get stuff for her.'

UK postgraduate

Disclosure of an impairment

International students were less likely than UK students to initially disclose impairments that would affect their study. Issues such as dyslexia or mental health problems were more likely to come to light once students had begun their course and realised they could not cope with it.

Staff suggested that there are students who may have an impairment that they did not declare on entry, either because they did not wish to be seen to be 'making excuses for themselves', or were concerned that they may be treated differently if they disclosed. Different experiences and uncertain expectations of the system combined with policy and cultural responses to disability and mental health issues in their home countries were offered as potential reasons for why international students in particular might be reluctant to declare an impairment.

'I think there's a culture in the UK of getting support at school and getting support at a college and things like that ... and I'm not sure if that's the same in other countries, so ... more of the international students I think may present when difficulties start to arise on the course.'

Staff member

Staff indicated that more could be done to educate international students about their rights in relation to equality legislation relating to disability equality during their studies.

Mental health

Beliefs, custom and practices in different countries can affect student behaviour and understanding. Respect for different perceptions, particularly from a non-European context, will help staff to understand how students react to, or cope with, aspects of stress and life. Staff, particularly in health and counselling services, need to be aware of the different ways disability and mental health matters are considered, discussed and handled in different parts of the world.

Some students felt that mental health services were limited in terms of provision. Although support for depression was well regarded, this was an area that students indicated required additional specialist support as the general practitioners in the health centre or local practice were not necessarily qualified to assist. Though students were informed of services like Nightline, the UK listening and emotional support service for students, students felt that there should be more provision to allow doctors to refer students to specialist mental health professionals.

Staff identified the importance of supporting international students with mental health concerns. While there are resources and good examples to draw from, the challenge remains to provide an environment in which students feel able to seek advice and support for stress and other mental health-related matters.

‘For some students, the crowded campus can be the loneliest place.’
Staff member

Counselling services reported an increase in students seeking advice and medical help for stress, which echoes the findings of the National Union of Students Scotland survey of students in Scottish HEIs and colleges in 2010 and 2011.

‘Mental health is a major area of student health. I would say that something like 15 per cent of our consultations are about psychological issues. A fifth to a third of those presenting with mental health matters would be overseas students. We have tried to address that by having, for example, a visiting community psychiatric nurse once a week. But I think if somebody is isolating themselves, showing very much withdrawal, then really we have got to go out there. I go out there with a student counsellor.’
Staff member

Health staff reported that international students in particular are unlikely to discuss psychological matters. The experience and empathy shown by medical or health staff are critical in such cases.

Medical and counselling staff report increased numbers of students requiring support for psychological reasons year on year.

'About a fifth to a third of those coming for medical consultations would be overseas students. We do have a huge number of overseas students and inevitably many of these are stress related, financial stress, or isolation or integration or perceptions, problems of perception. Sometimes they are simply of the neurosis type nature and talking things over will suffice.'

Staff member

A close relationship between academics and support services, including mental health services, is important to detect early signs of need.

'If an academic staff raises a problem, saying "X is having falling grades and I think there is a psychological issue. He is withdrawing. He is not turning up to classes." Then we make the approach and contact the student.'

Staff member

Through disability services, health services and student associations in particular, HEIs have worked proactively with key partners including the NHS to support disabled students, particularly in the area of mental health.

Equally Connected is an action research project from NHS Lothian, NHS Health Scotland and Heriot-Watt University that uses community development approaches, including the creative arts, to learn from black and minority ethnic communities about:

- = attitudes to, and experiences of, mental health
- = what helps maintain wellbeing
- = effective ways of challenging stigma and discrimination

A short film, *Breaking isolation*, was developed from this project as a resource to encourage international students to be more proactive in protecting their mental health and wellbeing by seeking help earlier. It deals with breaking isolation and dealing with stress, two key issues identified by the student film crew, which included students from Egypt, India, Nigeria, Poland, Portugal, Saudi Arabia and Scotland.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGz6wih3TLs

Recommendations

- = Review how the disability service is publicised to ensure all students, including postgraduates and international students, are aware of the support available.
- = Consider whether a more rigorous needs assessment process, comparable to that for UK students, is necessary for international students.
- = Review funding for disability services so that they can better meet the demands required by the Equality Act 2010.
- = Support integrated working with other departments, including with academic staff to provide proactive support, particularly for students with potential mental health difficulties.
- = Provide training and support for service staff on how culture impacts on key health and disability areas such as mental health and stress.

Further reading

- = ECU (2012) *Evidencing equality: approaches to increasing disclosure and take-up of disabled students' allowance*
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/evidencing-equality-approaches-to-increasing-disclosure-and-take-up-of-disabled-students-allowance
- = ECU (2010) *Managing reasonable adjustments in higher education*
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/managing-reasonable-adjustments-in-higher-education
- = NUS Scotland (2010) *Silently stressed: a survey into student mental wellbeing*
www.nus.org.uk/en/campaigns/campaigns-in-scotland/student-mental-health/silently-stressed
- = NUS Scotland (2011) *Breaking the silence: the follow-up report to silently stressed*
www.nus.org.uk/en/campaigns/campaigns-in-scotland/student-mental-health/nus-scotland-launches-breaking-the-silence

- = NUS Scotland (2011) *Students without borders: supporting international students toolkit*
www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/nations/scotland/withoutborders/sistraining
- = Young Minds (2006) *Stressed out and struggling: higher education institutes and international students' mental health*
www.mhhe.heacademy.ac.uk/themes/about-themes/student-mental-health-

2.7 Finance

Staff highlighted the importance of having an awareness of changing financial circumstances for students in order to be able to provide appropriate financial advice and support.

'If there are students where there are real difficulties ... rebellions or revolutions or monies prevented from coming from wherever it's supposed to be coming from ... we would of course as a university take steps, you know, around fees and ... living expenses.'

Staff member

This includes awareness of cash flow issues for students whose loans have not come through and ensuring that UK students commencing Erasmus programmes abroad are provided with appropriate advice on budgeting.

Postgraduate students may have specific financial considerations they would need support with.

'What that does mean is that they often come with grown-up issues, they come with families, and they come with housing issues. They come with money issues.'

Staff member

Staff were concerned that changes in the UKBA regulations would force them to spend increasing amounts of time on credit control rather than providing advice and support related to budget and debt management.

Hardship funds

All HEIs in the study have a way to support international students in cases of financial hardship and cash flow issues due to reasons outside the student's control, such as a national disaster in their home country or unforeseen political unrest preventing money from being transferred to the UK. They have different practices for this, including:

- = specific crisis funds
- = generic hardship fund for both unforeseen crises and other reasons, similar to the hardship fund for UK students
- = money given as a loan rather than a grant, which students are required to pay back before graduating

- = an amount taken from the fees of each full-time international student to form a hardship fund for all non-EU international students which is used to help students in distress, either as a grant or a loan, and any unused portion is carried forward to the following year

'It's a fund for international students and basically we top-slice for every international student fifty pounds into a fund. But that mounts up about seventy or eighty thousand and we then allocate that to students who are in financial hardship.'

Staff member

Transparent and fair support mechanisms provide important signals that all students are valued by the HEI. This includes being clear how HEIs can assist international students in financial hardship. In addition, providing good advice can also alleviate difficulties such as providing advice to students to take out insurance to cover themselves against unforeseen circumstances, for example, the loss of valuable property while studying in the UK.

37 per cent of international students and 65 per cent of UK students were aware of a hardship fund, which is mainly used by UK students. Staff suggested that the common perception that international students are from middle-class families is a possible factor for HEIs not prioritising hardship funds for international students. The absence of information about hardship funds for international students could be viewed as an inequity in provision.

'Sometimes among the international body finances can be quite an issue because again they don't have the element of funding available to them. The UK students can go and get hardship loans and things like that and again I suspect that this is a lot to do with pride and lack of knowledge of the facilities and services available ... So sometimes we will get reports of people who have, it's been noticed that they're not eating. Or you know they never eat in the flat or you never see them eating and things like this. So that comes up occasionally.'

Staff member

While UK students were more aware of the existence of hardship funds, both international and UK students indicated that there

needed to be greater clarity about what these funds were for and who was eligible for them.

'I think it could help so many people, you know, who are in that position. But nobody really knows about it.'

UK undergraduate

Some international students are unclear whether these funds are for both international and UK students. One international student assumed that the hardship fund was for UK students only, as the student had enquired about financial support but was not provided with any help or advice about the next steps.

'I told them that I've been one year and ... I have family and I don't have salary something like that they said "We can't do anything for you".'

Non-EU international postgraduate

Students mainly hear about hardship funds through word of mouth. HEIs' websites should provide clear guidance to international and UK students about eligibility criteria, application processes and any fund limitations.

In most cases, students (including one international student) who had used hardship funds were highly positive about the service. In particular, students appreciated that once deemed eligible, the process of completing the forms and obtaining the funds was swift. However, one student experienced issues with the hardship fund during her Erasmus programme which was due to a lack of clarity and insufficient communication between offices.

'Things aren't always clear. Like when I was in [country name] I was really so incredibly skint. I mean it was terrible and I applied for hardship while I was away. And they kept on needing more things that I just couldn't provide. And then I had to then borrow all this money from different family members when I was away and put them under loads of stress as well. When I spoke to [the hardship office] a week before I left they told me I'd get my grant and nothing would change. [They told me] that the cheque had been waiting for me since December and I didn't know any of that so it didn't actually help me that time. I think that ... things aren't always communicated.'

UK undergraduate

Examples of HEI webpages with clear information:

University of Bristol

www.bris.ac.uk/studentfunding/ihf.html

University of Edinburgh

www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-funding/financial-support/additional-financial-assistance/hardship-fund

University of Exeter

www.exeter.ac.uk/students/finance/studentfunding/internationalstudents

University of York

www.york.ac.uk/students/housing-and-money/financial-support/hardship/intnat-students-hardship

Recommendations

- = Provide clear information on the website for international students on hardship or emergency funds including eligibility criteria, the application process and any fund limitations.
- = Review how advice or guidance on money management and budgeting is made available to international students before they arrive.
- = Consider implementing a model of setting aside a small sum per full-time international fee to build up a hardship fund that can offer grants as well as loans.

Further reading

- = BBA (2011) *International students: opening a bank account*
www.bba.org.uk/publications/entry/international-students-opening-a-uk-bank-account/leaflets
- = UKCISA Financial hardship. Online resource.
www.ukcisa.org.uk/student/info_sheets/financial_hardship.php
- = UKCISA (2008) *Students in financial hardship: an adviser's guide*
www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/material_media/good_practice_guides.php

2.8 Health service

Students mentioned the usefulness of the health service in providing advice and support for specific needs such as depression, dyslexia and dyspraxia. However, it was otherwise barely mentioned in the student focus groups, which may be due to a general satisfaction with the service or because it is not a service that the students have utilised as much.

Medical staff, like many other services, have developed knowledge of some of the cultural differences or interpretations of health and disease as they have increasingly worked with diverse student groups.

While students did not discuss health in great detail, this area was mentioned in focus groups in each participating HEI. Student views were mixed. Some stated that the health service was helpful in relation to providing advice and support for areas like depression while others indicated there were occasions when reception staff were abrupt and prone to making assumptions triggered by age, nationality, ethnicity or gender.

Consultation periods need to be long to enable students to talk about issues facing them. Often time is required to identify the real cause of the illness or anxiety.

‘They will come along with headaches or come along with stomach-aches, come along with a physical problem. I think we need the time to enquire a bit more rather than write out the prescription for some painkillers or some antacids. I think we need the time to talk about how school is doing, how is the family doing, what contact do you have with your parents back home ... sometimes if you have visited that particular country ... it is amazing how people will light up if you say you have been to Pakistan ... you have grown up in east Africa, whatever it is ... and then there is a lot more ... you are taking it out with specifically the medical problem and then you move on from there.’

Staff member

Registration

Both international and UK students experienced difficulties in registering with a doctor, describing the process as time consuming and problematic.

'I found that quite hard because it is really hard to find a doctor and really hard to find someone who has space for you. Every time I have been ill here I have had to go to A&E because I have just not been able to register.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

Visibility of the health service on campus

Students stated that HEI health centres should have an easily identifiable physical presence on campus. An integrated health centre offering a range of health services including general practice, dentistry and a community psychiatric team was seen as a benefit by students.

Sexual health service

Sexual health-related matters were not approached in a systematic way by HEIs leaving many students unaware of where to go to for advice or help.

Recommendations

- = Provide guidance on local health services, how to register with a doctor and different types of health provision on offer.

Further reading

- = Lartey, GK, Mishra, S, Odonwedo, DE and Chitalu, C (2009) 'Factors influencing the health behaviours of international students at a university'. *International Journal of Health Research* 2(2):131–138.
www.ijhr.org/vol2_no2/index.php

2.9 Sport, leisure and exercise

One HEI described a few examples of inclusive practice in sport in the research. These initiatives, outlined in this section, demonstrate how participation rates among a diverse student population including international students can be increased.

Cultural awareness sessions

Cultural awareness sessions were held with sports centre staff to enable staff to appreciate how diversity might impact on their work.

‘We did some training with the staff just on equality and diversity, helping them to sort of find other ways to communicate if you know language can become an issue. It is also about helping someone think about different behaviour. For example, some cultures are more abrupt than others and you know just helping the staff to realise that doesn’t mean that they’re dissatisfied or anything it’s just, you know, what they’re used to.’

Staff member

‘There was this Muslim lady who played in the netball team. She has been coming for about three years now. However in the early stages, there were issues that came up. One being that she obviously wears a headdress and she has to wear it with a pin in it so that was an issue. It was a case of the umpire not being sure of how this could affect play because obviously you’re not allowed any jewellery on. But that was something that was sorted out. The lady tucks up her head dress rather than pins it.’

Staff member

This woman’s presence in the netball team encouraged the umpire and teammates to consider other elements of inclusion, such as the venue choice for team meals to ensure that halal or vegetarian options were available.

Consultation

Early and frequent consultation with a range of students, including international students, facilitates programming, assigning the use of space and developing new activities. As a result of consultation, it became clear that a large number of international students were interested in basketball. The sports centre staff programmed a number of drop-in hall spaces for basketball.

'On a Saturday pretty much for about four hours, the basketballs are out and it's international students who just come, they can drop in when they want basically and just play basketball.'

Staff member

Action following consultation can help to increase participation in sports services from a range of students. The HEI responded to students' desire for increased privacy in the communal single-sex changing facilities by adding a number of cubicles to the changing rooms. This contributed to improved participation from a number of student groups, including women, students from certain faith groups and international students.

Similarly, enabling rooms to be hidden from view by attaching blinds may also improve participation rates.

'Last summer the Muslim society came to us and this guy he said "I really want to keep exercising ... but I just can't because of religious grounds. I wouldn't even change in front of my brother never mind people that I don't know." We were able to take a staff changing area that was in there and change it into individual change areas and then on the ladies' side we put in cubicles in the showers so that in theory they could change privately. And that was a big issue ... not just for the Muslim community, for international communities but also for home-based students because a lot of them just don't like changing in public. Any new development that we do we would consider the international nature of the university and speak to the groups on campus and say "right, what ideally would you be looking for?"'

Staff member

'We had another group [mainly Muslim women] wanting to use the hall at different times, but one of the issues was being overlooked so the sports hall now has blinds on the windows so that if they wanted to do anything in the hall it can be completely shut off.'

Staff member

Activities and sports offered

The HEI ran an international students' sports day, which was organised by student representatives at the sports centre, to showcase the facilities and activities available at the sports centre. It was also a useful opportunity to hear from international students what they would expect from the centre or new sports that could be supported, such as Gaelic football.

'We need to provide them with the student experience if they come to the university. They can get involved in the culture and the surroundings and not only them coming to the Scottish culture but the Scottish culture developing really to get to know the foreign cultures ... and you really achieve this through discussions and relationships.'

UK undergraduate

Staff and students saw team sports as an ideal platform to encourage mixing of international and UK students. Staff highlighted how greater participation by international students strengthens the sporting achievements of clubs. They also indicated that an HEI with an inclusive sports and exercise centre with access to a personal trainer that can help with fitness and diet issues was seen as a real benefit that contributes to the overall student experience, which may be of particular interest for students who have not previously participated in sport.

To appeal to a diverse demographic the HEI's sports centre offers exercise classes including yoga and tai chi, alongside a range of competitive sports. Staff indicated additional benefits for broadening the programme.

'The reason they go to the sports centre is they know someone else will be there. Their loneliness is so great that they don't have to speak to anyone but they know that there will be staff there and they know that there will be other people around so they just feel, you know because the isolation is such as that they're in a hall's room, they haven't made any friends. So I think getting on and selling the non-sports element of it is crucial because not everyone wants to play sports.'

Staff member

Sporting culture

Staff and student respondents felt that sports club cultures need to be addressed to ensure that they engage with the increasingly multicultural and diverse demographic on campus. Failure to do so can not only exclude but also discriminate. One staff respondent discussed how black and minority ethnic students, including international students, appeared to participate less in sporting clubs or associations than white students. Several staff respondents also voiced concern that participation in drinking culture still helps develop camaraderie and facilitates selection on to teams.

‘So if you want to be chosen to be picked for a game by the captain, in one of the top teams, you have got to participate in a drinking competition. If you don’t drink or can’t be in an alcoholic environment ... it is like going back to the old boys network. But this is what happens ... and as for the students’ union ... well they are all on the same page so not sure about raising it as an issue.’

Staff member

Working with other services and departments

Close working with other services is important to ensure students view the sports, leisure and exercise facilities as part of the student experience and not a service to be taken up only by those who are particularly good at sports. Staff respondents from sports services work closely with the international office and students’ union to make sure they have a strong presence during freshers’ week.

They felt that there are still more opportunities to work with other departments and support areas.

‘We’ve got a hundred students arriving from wherever to start an MSc at the business school ... so that we could say right there’s all the leaflets, can we have five minutes with them, you know before they come in ... tell them that they’ll get a tour at this date, this time round the facilities. Academics, registry and ourselves need to work closer together so that we can approach the September as well as the January intakes.’

Staff member

Staff members recognised that more could be done for international students with families such as organising summer placement schemes and holiday clubs. Community groups and other local resources may support this.

Postgraduate and mature student participation

For postgraduates, the biggest restriction to taking up sports and positions within clubs was their length of stay in Scotland, according to staff.

‘Say you are voted on into a committee at the sort of AGM time which is March and so you start your position in the next year. For postgraduate students to get roles, it would really be on the odd chance where a position hadn’t been filled or the person was here for more than one year.’

Staff member

Students mentioned that age was a barrier for some in participating or using sports centre facilities, particularly in HEIs that cater for a large number of undergraduate students. Students suggested that more effort was required to ensure that facilities were open and attractive to mature students as well.

Cost

Students expressed contrasting views in relation to the pricing of sports services. Some suggested lowering prices while others spoke positively of the discounts available for HEI members. Some students indicated that the membership fee structure was potentially inequitable, particularly for students who spend large amounts of time on placement. Where these placements necessitated time away from campus, there should be some compensation for the loss of ability to use the facilities. Students suggested one way of overcoming these would be to have semester memberships at a pro-rata rate of the annual fee, which are provided by some HEIs. This would also benefit exchange students who may only be on campus for one semester.

Recommendations

- = Review how sports, exercise and leisure centres, sports clubs and affiliated groups have assessed their provision in relation to the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.
- = Consider how international student views are sought to inform the programming and planning of facilities and activities.
- = Provide cultural awareness training for all staff and sport association leaders.
- = Consider the diverse needs of students such as supporting those with families by providing sports activities for children during school holidays.
- = Consider the introduction of pro-rata fees for short-term membership.

Further reading

- = ECU (2011) *Include and inspire: sport and fitness services in higher education*
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/include-and-inspire-sport-and-fitness-services-in-higher-education

2.10 Students' union or association

UK students spoke positively about their students' union or association and its ability to represent the student voice. They specifically noted the ways the union or association communicates information to students through class representatives, enabling email contact with elected members, filling in feedback comment sheets and the use of Facebook. UK students felt the students' union or association is particularly effective on some of the major issues currently facing students such as responding to cuts, challenging the rise in tuition fees, and supporting lecturers on the changes to pension rights.

'For big things like anti-cuts or lectures, pensions or fees, the union's been really good at setting up a system for you to then complain. So they've written standard letters and then sent it to everyone and been like "if you want to send this to the principal you can". So that kind of complaint is really easy. Or you can email the union and be like "can we do something about this?" ... then if a lot of students write a letter or sign a petition then those people are ... able to go to the higher levels [and say] "look 200 people have written to us and said this is what they want".'

UK undergraduate

Students who have used the union or association found the staff and student representatives to be helpful. International students were less forthcoming with comments about their students' union or association, however, those who had used the union or association felt that their views were listened to and taken seriously and that they were treated fairly. Several staff respondents felt that unless students' unions or associations appoint a paid sabbatical officer with primary responsibility for international matters, these issues risk being overlooked or marginalised.

'In this university, we have over a third of our students who are international. I think international student voices should be heard and if there was an international student sabbatical, in a paid post. That would definitely help.'

Staff member

Students' unions or associations as a business

Students felt students' unions or associations need to have a strong working relationship with the HEI as a whole and not try to charge students 'for everything they can'. Some students stated that their unions were too money-focused.

'In my past three years, and especially this past year, seeing the relationship between the union and the university and how appalling it is, is really disheartening. It is more of a battle between the union and the university because the union is very poorly funded and the university doesn't necessarily have more money to be giving them as the union is meant to be a business. Our union won't allow clubs and societies to start up if there is any chance that they will lose money. It is great that they are trying to encourage students our age to be careful with money and to be treating it like a proper business ... but especially at university level, this is one of the times in our lives that I personally feel we can endeavour in something and fail and that is OK. And I don't think students should be put off of starting societies because they are not quite sure how it is going to end up.'

Non-EU international undergraduate

Awareness of diverse needs

The National Union of Students' research into international student experiences of unions recommended that unions need to 'develop as a place for cultural and social exchange for all students' and that 'traditional social events adapted for international students do not work'. ECU's Inclusive students' union project found that in the main student leaders are not representative of the student body, and are not suitably well-informed of equality issues. The project suggested that international students were less likely to participate in the students' union than other groups.

Staff felt that diversity awareness is currently dependent on having sabbatical officers or international student volunteer officers who have an interest in this area. The online survey found that while international students were comfortable about approaching their students' union or association for advice, the union or association was not one of the first places they would go to for support. The students' union or association was ranked below other categories such as friends, staff and the careers

service. In HEIs with a higher number of international students, particularly at postgraduate level, international students are slightly better represented within the students' union or association.

'You are seeing international students beginning to ... get elected and get into those roles. So they are beginning to address the issues round religion and sports, around societies and tapping into support networks in Aberdeen area ... and that's driven from not necessarily the university but from the students themselves.'

Staff member

Staff within students' unions or associations are aware that they need to better represent international students and adopt different strategies to achieve this. One HEI avoided a specific internationalisation strategy for the union, believing that this might create a bolt-on approach, preferring instead to embed international issues into all activities. In another HEI, the students' union has developed an internationalisation strategy as well as a mainstreaming approach. This study would support the latter as the most effective way forward. Mainstreaming only works if those who have to engage with mainstreaming already understand the issues that need to be embedded. If this is not the case, then mainstreaming has the potential for diluting or losing the issue it is meant to address.

The student association at the University of Strathclyde has developed an internationalisation strategy outlining action areas for ensuring that international student matters are considered. Key areas include induction, representation and communication, democracy and participation, access to services, officer and staff development and links with the community.

Officers with responsibility for these key areas have to identify how they are taking international issues on board and assign key performance indicators.

This strategy was developed as part of the prime minister's initiative for international education, a funded National Union of Students' project on internationalising students' unions.

Student societies

There was also criticism from some international students of the union or association's relationship with affiliated societies.

'I think it is a view that is shared among all the students. You just hear everyone saying "I hate x, it is so irritating, they are very inefficient" ... I am in several societies and x has lost several of our applications, speaking from experience. I think people feel alienated from the union.'

International student

There was some concern that more popular societies were accorded higher status than those that cater for cultural issues associated with minority or international groups.

Class representatives

Both international and UK students in the focus groups felt that the role of the class representatives is important. However, students suggested that class representatives should be selected carefully to ensure they are not merely taking the role to pursue their own agenda.

'You get the impression he's definitely got his own agenda ... And he's taken the role very seriously but I think to suit his own purposes, not the class.'

UK postgraduate

Students felt that postgraduates were less represented than undergraduates in student matters, unless there is a specific postgraduate issue. They agreed that while it is helpful to have representation at each level, this depends on individual students putting themselves forward as potential representatives and it may be more difficult to attract postgraduate students. However, an active campaign to address underrepresentation of certain groups can be successful if there is commitment to pursue such an initiative.

Students were not sure how effective students' unions or associations could be when it comes to dealing with the HEI system. Students from the focus groups were critical of HEI bureaucracy and management and how much student representatives can achieve.

'There's a lot of arrogance and disrespect towards students. I mean as soon as you come over slightly negative, a slightly critical and you just have as much as a question and say "could you please clarify this for me?". You're very often treated that way. You're very often just dismissed like it doesn't really matter, if you would however go through the right channels which I don't know where they are or whether there are any. Because as soon as you talk to someone that feels above you, you're just not heard.'

UK undergraduate

Alcohol

Many staff members and students in this research spoke of the role of alcohol in Scottish/UK student culture. Though the views expressed can result in perpetuating homogeneous views of cultures and contribute to stereotyping, the points made about alcohol use were mentioned too frequently to be marginalised.

'UK students are more prone to anti-social noise behaviour, alcohol related issues ... Some nationalities will occasionally drink but the UK body of students is more a constant alcohol frenzy kind of thing. For a lot of the international body out with Europe that tends not to be their cultural thing so you tend not to find those kind of issues.'

Staff member

'You find even the freshers' packs have things like bottle openers, vouchers for cheap or free shots of alcohol, it is such an alcohol-infused culture.'

Staff member

There were concerns about the health aspects of drinking to excess, particularly affecting students from abroad, who might not be used to drinking so heavily, but feel they need to in order to fit in. Students in focus groups also mentioned that many of the social activities provided by unions or associations were linked to alcohol, which was restricting for students that do not drink.

'There's quite a few international students and ... women who come in and they're not coming from a drinking culture ... and so many of our activities here are centred around a bar or drinking.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

Spaces to socialise in students' unions or associations

Some respondents mentioned opportunities to create spaces for socialising that are not linked to alcohol consumption. However, the lack of physical space in the students' union or association was cited as a barrier to creating or releasing spaces to enable alcohol-free zones. Staff and students also felt that students' unions or associations may be reluctant to decrease alcohol-related activities because of the income-generation possibilities of bars.

'I've kind of noticed is that Middle Eastern student groups like to sit and drink coffee together. Extremely strong coffee. Although we have coffee shops, we don't as a university sort of say, you know this is something that some of the students could really enjoy, let's make it part of the students' union.'

Staff member

'A lot of it's to do with the structure of the students' union. You know there's a bar on each level so it's really difficult to have an area that's not got alcohol in it.'

Staff member

Students' union or association officers taking part in this study were aware of these issues and had begun to make sure that alcohol-free spaces are factored in to any refurbishment of premises. Staff and students suggested that the students' union or association culture could be rethought so that facilities have wider appeal to a diverse student population, including child-friendly areas.

The prevalence of alcohol-related social events in sports clubs and associations was also mentioned (as outlined in section 2.9).

Recommendations

- = Adopt an international strategy as well as embedding internationalisation issues into functions and activities.
- = Consider how international issues might be better championed among sabbatical officers.
- = Review how clubs and associations affiliated to the union or association meet the spirit of the Equality Act 2010 and consider the participation of international students.

Class representatives

- = Issue guidance for students intending to take up the role of student representative so that the duties associated with the role are clear.
- = Provide training for class representatives covering issues of equality and international issues.
- = Address the issue of improving representation from postgraduate students.

Awareness of diverse needs

- = Consider how to better meet the needs of international students with dependants by developing a 'café culture' and an ethos that is more conducive to a multicultural and diverse student cohort.
- = Services providing hospitality, food and beverages for all students on campus should explore how they can move towards a format where alcohol is part of what is offered but not the dominant focus.
- = Senior managers should give clear messages of standards that should be set by clubs, societies, service providers and those organising events for students or staff of the need to consider diversity as part of the planning process.

Further reading

- = ECU (2007) *Inclusive students' unions: equality and diversity in practice*
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/inclusive-students-unions-equality-and-diversity
- = NUS (2009) *Internationalising students' unions in higher education: a strategic framework and audit toolkit for students' unions*
www.ukcisa.org.uk/files/pdf/pmi/nus_internationalising_su_audit_tool.pdf
- = NUS and SPARQS (2010) *Students without borders: international student engagement*
www.nus.org.uk/en/campaigns/campaigns-in-scotland/learning-and-teaching-campaigns-page/beyond-borders

2.11 Support for international students with dependants

While at present the number of international students with dependants is a minority (6.7 per cent of survey respondents said they have dependants), many respondents felt that current provision needs attention.

Staff said that HEIs assist students with children who seek support in finding relevant accommodation and giving advice on schools and childcare. However, the few students with dependants who took part in the focus groups indicated that they did not always receive relevant or adequate support. One student did not know that accommodation services could offer specific accommodation for families. Others suggested that more information about nurseries and how places are allocated would be helpful. International students in particular wanted to know if there could be positive action taken to provide them with spaces in HEI-run nurseries.

Most HEIs are exploring ways to provide activities for international students and their families, including activities for their children, English language classes for partners who may otherwise be isolated, and arranging affordable trips so that international students have the opportunity to get together as family groups.

One HEI organises trips for international students with families where the adults pay but the children go free. These are generally organised via the international student support office, the chaplaincy or students' union. However the lack of funding is a barrier to increasing such provision.

International students are likely to feel the impact of a lack of information about schooling, childcare, youth activities and further education options more than UK students. While a UK student might – like an international student – face moving to a new geographical location, they face fewer issues in adapting to the culture or language and have greater access to support networks.

Recommendations

- = Provide information about schooling (early years, primary and secondary), areas to look for accommodation that are safe and within easy walking distance of schools, places to buy different foods and information about the NHS and eligibility for family members.
- = Establish links with local authorities and schools to assist students with families, especially those arriving at non-standard times of the school year.
- = Provide information on youth services, further education options and English language classes based within local adult education programmes.

3 Campus cohesion

Staff saw the increasing representation of international students in societies and at course and faculty level as assisting the promotion of good relations.

While staff described the campus atmosphere as one where students get on well together, three issues emerged.

- = The challenge to ensure a 'truly' international experience given that some subject areas consist nearly exclusively of international students, in some cases from the same country.
- = The importance of being aware of the potential conflicts that may arise between individuals and groups. That is, inter and intra group issues that may be shaped by the political contexts and relationships in their countries of origin.
- = The importance of emphasising the contribution of international students not only to the HEI but also to the city. International students have a great deal to offer and should not be perceived as merely having needs. In general staff reported that they pick up 'cultural awareness' on the job and would value receiving seminars to explore inter-cultural communication or awareness raising from personnel with expertise in these areas.

3.1 Relationship between staff and international students

Several staff respondents felt that staff need support to move beyond the perception of difference as a problem.

'Some staff really need to move away from a "what now syndrome". Their reaction particularly for international students from some countries ... it's like what are we being asked for now, kind of thing.'

Staff member

International students noted at times that staff were impatient, appeared to lack understanding or were perceived as rude.

'As an international student, with the whole visa thing, sometimes you just get a little frustrated because you don't know if they understand what it is like to be an international student. And you are just like "you don't understand, this is an actual problem. I need to get my visa so I can book this ticket" and it doesn't happen. And you know they are not mean, it is just very frustrating. So it would be nice if they could understand that.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

Some staff respondents discussed their concerns about how different international cohorts were perceived, with staff seeing some as easier to deal with than others.

'I know that if somebody is from the Republic of Ireland staff don't see them as different or problems, unlike another student, say, who's from China. It's just an ingrained thing and while somebody's response might not be inherently to discriminate as these other cultures are out with your own terms of reference, maybe you do. And I think actually we need to challenge but in a non-threatening way ... in a way that says you don't have to panic because someone's different.'

Staff member

Preparing staff to deal with international students' issues

The increasing focus on internationalisation and competition for students was seen to be a key driver for change.

'I would say, in the past two, maybe three years, there's been a focus on well wait a minute, what are they bringing to the university, what are they getting from the university? What do our staff know about them? How do we prepare the staff?'

Staff member

Staff recognised a need to be more culturally aware, however it is difficult to say from the interviews conducted whether recruiting diverse staff in the context of internationalisation is a strategic priority, and if it is, how it is being addressed.

Staff members recognised that there is still some way to go to move beyond 'lip service' to ensure all support staff understand the implications on their roles of having international students.

'Of course [international students] have challenges but they have different challenges and we have to address that ... and understand it's not just a student from a local community coming which is a fairly straightforward entry route in ... and that comes with all support services, admissions, enrolment, careers, finance, sport, everything, worship.'

Staff member

Senior staff in particular were aware of the need to address attitudes towards different cultures at all levels of the institution, especially those with frontline duties, in the context of growing numbers of international students. Training for staff in interacting with people from diverse backgrounds was seen to be critical to meeting increasing diversity.

'If you look at someone coming into an institution the first people they see are either the janitor ... or the receptionist and if you've got a good receptionist as we've seen in some buildings, that can create a whole different ambience to how somebody feels versus somebody who doesn't.'

Staff member

'Students have come across as being quite abrupt but library staff have done sessions on cultural differences ... how to be careful of any gestures or speaking in kind of library speak that might you know confuse anybody. So we've had several of these courses that library staff have gone to and combined with our customer service experience.'

Staff member

Staff across a range of services talked about the challenges of keeping up with cultural matters which they saw to be increasing as the student population becomes more diverse. They recognised that lack of awareness of other cultures could

lead to misinterpreting behaviour or reinforcing stereotypes; maintaining a balance between the two can be a challenge.

'Sometimes with the Chinese community they tend to all talk at once and very quickly and people say "oh, something terrible is going on next door" like, you know and you're "oh, no they're sitting doing their coursework", sitting round the table drinking coffee and having a nice time.'

Staff member

'Some people are terribly oversensitive. I mean in all of my years in the library service I've had members of staff come to me and say, somebody at the desk is being very difficult. And actually they're not being difficult ... staff perceptions vary enormously ... really about what is rudeness, what is someone being difficult.'

Staff member

Preparing international students for a different cultural environment

Staff acknowledged that international students may benefit from sessions to give understanding of the Scottish and UK culture, which would assist them to become familiar with the norms of the institution and the local community. Sessions would not force any form of assimilation but provide information that would better enable international students to negotiate their way through daily interactions. HEIs could use these sessions as an opportunity to explain their values in relation to equality, diversity and fairness.

Staff indicated that both international and UK students need to increase their awareness of different cultures, for example in developing friendships with a more diverse range of fellow students. Staff felt that some were clearly not used to encountering diversity.

'I think a lot of the home students, particularly the younger ones, they don't get it you know. They are not used to speaking to people from other cultures so you know they'll maybe talk too fast. It's not that they're hostile but they just don't quite know how to do it.'

Staff member

Several female staff respondents across several HEIs mentioned the difficulties female staff had in interacting with male students from some countries and attributed these to differences in cultural value systems about gender and role status.

'We've had students, male students, who don't want to be dealt with by female members of staff.'

Staff member

'Some students just do not respect support staff like they do academic staff.'

Staff member

Recommendations

- = Ensure that there are regular opportunities for staff to attend equality and cultural awareness training.
- = Provide opportunities for open dialogue to allow staff to discuss anxieties within a learning and supportive framework as well as share examples of good and innovative practice to promote integration and good relations.
- = Provide opportunities to enable support staff to reflect on how personal values and attitudes can influence behaviour at every day service levels.
- = Ensure cultural differences and norms are featured in orientation activities and materials.

3.2 Interaction between international and UK students

From the small amount of research there is currently on international students, there seems to be a tendency for international students to interact with co-nationals with little evidence of extensive cross-cultural relationships and friendships. In addition, for UK students, friendships with international students are not a priority.

This is supported by comments from several staff respondents who note the need for more work to be done with UK students to raise their awareness of diversity and to become comfortable with diversity. Staff saw this as important to take forward, with the added benefit that it would assist UK students to become more employable in diverse settings and also across the world.

Stereotypes, prejudice and misunderstandings

Both international and UK students made positive and negative comments about each other.

Students talked about divisions as a result of age, or levels of programmes (undergraduate or postgraduate), social class, ethnicity and national groupings. Where people live can also act as a bridge or barrier.

‘Having more in common with people that live closer to you outside the university.’

International postgraduate

International postgraduate students were likely to indicate that it was difficult to form friendships with UK students.

‘We are here in Scotland but I don’t have lots of Scottish friends.’

International postgraduate

‘Meeting Scottish people is difficult even when your first language is English.’

International postgraduate

Some international students explained that socialising within their own language or nationality groups enables them to discuss and focus on their coursework. As many postgraduates are only on site for just under a year, the ability to discuss coursework without language barriers was seen to be helpful for learning purposes. Others felt that being with ‘your own people’

was simply easier as it took any strains out of trying to adjust and understand cultural differences. However, some international students felt that they had been forced to form study and friendship groups among themselves as UK students were not prepared to include them.

'Between the foreign students, we make ourselves a team. We have a team for meeting on the non-class days to discuss about the class, how to take it forward but [UK students] don't, never mingle with us and even if you try to speak to them they avoid us. It's a little pathetic for us because we come here to study and thought like knowing their culture would be better but they are arrogant in allowing us to join.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

UK students felt that international students from other Western countries or from European backgrounds have difficulties because of a lack of familiarity with the Scottish or British education system. Their perception of other non-EU international students was more of cultural difference and the language used tended to reflect views of these students as the 'other'.

'I don't know if there's a scope for ... orientation course at the beginning, for international students ... especially in time keeping. And just little cultural things like, you know, hand to your mouth when you cough and these things that only seem really small but to us they're not. You know ... you're talking to someone and they cough in your face ... it kind of puts you off them a wee bit.'

UK postgraduate

'A lady gets on a bus, you get up and you give her a seat. It's what we do. It's the British kind of culture, you know, or the European culture if you want. I know I'm generalising here ... I've actually said to people, you know, "give the lady a seat", and actually asked them to get up because the buses are packed and they just don't notice.'

UK postgraduate

There were strong views towards particular nationalities who were perceived to speak loudly, be discourteous as they spoke over other people, be unable to keep to time, prone to miss classes and could not be trusted to carry out any positions they hold with integrity (eg, class representative). While it was helpful that students felt able to discuss these sentiments openly during

the focus group session, UK students in particular stated that they would find matters related to race, ethnicity, religion or cultural differences difficult to mention and uncomfortable to discuss for fear of being seen to be racist. Quite a few UK students prefaced their comments with statements like 'I have to be careful what I say here because it is a cultural thing' or 'I'm not being racist saying this but ...'.

'If you say anything you feel like people point the finger straight away and say "you are being, you know, a racist or a bigot" or something. You go "well I'm not really", you know. It's just a fact. You know, you've got people turning up forty five minutes after a lecture started. And then when you want to go these are the people at the end asking long convoluted questions. And I think "well if you were here at the beginning".'

UK postgraduate

This could be detected particularly in views towards Muslim students where UK students were conscious not to fall into the trap of stereotypes and Islamophobia but in so doing demonstrate their nervousness when discussing issues of difference.

'It's fascinating to find out more about their Muslim culture and what it is ... you know, because it gets such a lot of bad press. You realise that it's absolutely the opposite of everything that you hear about. And so it's a real eye opener ... I've put down none in the religious [monitoring form box]. But if I was going to be anything I'd probably be a Muslim to be honest with you [laughs]. Cause they're such an easy going chilled out bunch!'

UK postgraduate

Some UK students took being in the majority as a given and had a preference for 'sameness' when it came to forging relationships. This was largely due to having the security of shared commonalities and 'same' ways of being brought up.

'As white British we're used to being the majority in any sort of cultures that we've been part of previously. I think you sort of fall in to the circles that you would fall into anyway. So although I live with

an Irish guy and an American guy, I'd probably say the people from the UK or the males from the UK I'm greater friends with because we have more in common anyway.'

UK postgraduate

Similarly, some UK students expressed dissatisfaction when in a minority within class or study group. UK students studying in predominantly international cohorts found they sat apart and felt excluded.

'I'm the only one. There are a few European white students and they tend to stick together. I'm usually with those [names the nationality] people just because we've been put in the same groups to do assessed work. And I'm working with them mostly. So usually just land up with them.'

UK postgraduate

'I would say that for international students, it is easier to kind of, be on a one-year masters, to kind of get off on a good footing socially because your friends are already there. My courses have always been dominated by Germans ... I'm just the same because I studied in France for a year. All my friends were from the UK as well, so that's what you do, that's how it works, because we're lazy and it's easier to speak English.'

UK postgraduate

Where UK students talked positively about international students it was generally related to the size and diversity within a cohort. A small and diverse group would appear to aid integration and enable positive views of each other.

'We researchers are all international as well. But it's very positive. Algerian, Iraqi, Dutch, British. You know, and it's a really, really good mix, really productive. It's not a negative experience at all. Because there's just a wee bit from each rather than a huge contingent from one.'

UK postgraduate

Some negative views were voiced by international students about the level of fluency in English of other international students.

'I think they get a lot leeway in our department. I have seen the final hand ins and it was appalling. It was just like, I would not pass if that was me handing it in. That is just because I am a fluent English speaker and they would challenge me on it ...'

International postgraduate

Mutual support and integration

Students in the focus groups offered suggestions to assist integration.

- = Lecturers could assist by forming groups rather than leaving students to form work or study groups themselves. This would assist students to talk to people they may not naturally choose to.
- = International students should be offered advice on 'dos and don'ts' while staying in Scotland at a social level – what is deemed to be polite behaviour – and at an academic level – understanding how the system here works such as the need for evidence-based writing – not copying – citing correctly and so on.
- = UK students should be offered opportunities to develop awareness of diversity and difference.
- = It would help to see more diversity in HEI staff, particularly academics. The latter are generally white and either UK, EU or from North America.

The majority of staff felt that international and UK student interactions are positive. Some indicated that there is a need to question the term 'integration' and questioned the role support services had in 'forcing integration' if these links do not occur naturally. The general view was that 'forced integration' was not acceptable.

This study found examples of creative practices that have been developed to foster mutuality and integration between international and UK students.

Peer proofreading

The University of Edinburgh's student association developed a scheme following high demand from students for whom English is an additional language for reliable sources of help in proofreading assignments. In the scheme, student volunteers proofread the work of fellow students after attending a training session run by the students' association and the institute of academic development.

The aims of the scheme are:

- = to increase access to trustworthy proofreading services on campus
- = to reduce dependency upon proofreading services among users of the scheme by training them to spot basic grammar and spelling errors
- = to enhance the sense of community among students at the university through peer support
- = to provide student volunteers with a rewarding volunteering opportunity, developing their transferable skills and experience

In order to take part, students must:

- = not speak English as their first language
- = submit assignments at least seven days before the deadline
- = submit assignments of 3000 words or less
- = submit no more than two assignments or chapters per semester
- = have a valid university address

Proofreaders do not comment on the content of the assignment or chapter, they only comment on the grammar, vocabulary and general clarity of written English. This scheme has proven to be highly successful and is now a permanent service offered to international students each year.

Feedback from peer proofreading has fed into the university's initiative to improve English language support available for international students.

Tandem

Originally funded by the Scottish government's fresh talent challenge fund, Tandem is a language exchange programme now funded by the University of Edinburgh's students' association. Through weekly events and an online matching database, the scheme promotes mutuality and appreciation of what international and UK students can offer each other.

For example, UK students interested in volunteering abroad can be paired up with a student from the country who is willing to offer conversational classes in the local language. Similarly, an international student coming to Scotland may wish to have opportunities to improve their language skills and will be paired up with a native speaker of English from the UK.

Through the Tandem scheme, not only are language skills being improved but the programme has enabled people to learn in a fun, relaxed social environment without the pressure of examinations or lectures.

Feedback from Tandem has fed into the students' association's successful campaign to lobby the university to provide a range of free language courses for all students.

Recommendations

- = Encourage relationships between international and UK students.
- = Provide UK students, regardless of their programme, with opportunities to develop their awareness of diversity issues and understanding of different cultures and their skills to challenge prejudices, stereotyping and discrimination.
- = Consider providing sessions to help international students learn about the social and academic conventions in the UK and assist integration. Such sessions should be clear and honest and discuss difficult and sometimes controversial issues such as the need for students to respect gender equality and know about equality principles, and issues of racism in Scotland or the UK and where students can go for support.

Further reading

- = British Council (2011) *Creating confidence: making sure that your time in the UK is safe and enjoyable*
www.britishcouncil.org/creating_confidence_2011-12.pdf
- = UKCISA (2009) *Discussing difference, discovering similarities*
www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/material_media/pubs_crosscultural.php

4 Community engagement

Engagement with local communities is an important part of the international student experience.

The relationships between HEIs, students and the local communities in which the HEIs are located may vary depending on a number of factors.

These include:

- = location of the HEI and its regional context
- = the extent and nature of students' relationships with the local community
- = issues such as students' length of study, financial constraints and cultural difference
- = individual staff contacts

Community relationships may involve:

- = volunteering
- = participation in faith, cultural, family-orientated or leisure activities
- = accessing services
- = part-time employment

Most students from the focus groups who are involved in the local community, particularly UK undergraduates, either volunteer, have a work placement or work part-time. Some students were aware that they could access relevant information in relation to getting involved with the community from the HEI, and had actively done so from the career service website, students' union or association, chaplaincy or academic departments.

'There are opportunities within departments to do summer placement. The advice career centre is very well prepared and it is very active and supportive. They have so much information and contacts with employers providing placements.'

UK postgraduate

On the whole, most students, and international students in particular, were not actively involved in their local communities. The main reasons cited for this were:

- = lack of time
- = extensive programme demands
- = not knowing how to contribute
- = not knowing that the HEI could provide relevant information
- = opportunities are not advertised or only targeted at specific courses
- = feeling guilty about the short-term nature of any potential contributions
- = being uncertain whether opportunities would contravene visa restrictions

'I think one of the reasons I didn't volunteer is because I thought if I leave I would feel really guilty to stop. So I think the idea of knowing I am not going to be here prevented me from volunteering. I would feel quite guilty to start a project and then leave it. So that uncertainty about that has maybe stopped me getting really involved. And it turns out that is good because I am moving. I am like "OK that was a good call" because I would feel bad.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

'I think they maybe make assumptions about the type of course you're on ... my undergraduate course was social work. And it's on this floor. If you turn the corner you'll see a notice board full of notices asking people to volunteer for this, that and the next thing. But in the business school you won't see that on their notice boards. So these organisations obviously think they should target people that's on courses like social work. That they might be more amenable to doing volunteering which isn't necessarily the case.'

UK undergraduate

It is difficult to effectively assess the extent and quality of relationships between host communities, international and UK students from the research. Staff, particularly at more rural campuses, expressed some concerns of potentially negative attitudes to international students, especially those who struggled with English, among the local population.

4.1 Volunteering

Volunteering opportunities are usually organised and provided through institutions' students' unions or associations or careers services. HEIs and students' unions or associations routinely organise events such as a travel and volunteering fair, to encourage students to consider community or international volunteering and buddying schemes.

'We started a student buddy scheme and that's been expanded this year incrementally. It does rely on volunteers it's a kind of win-win situation. It's a win for the students who are being either helped by a volunteer ambassador or mentored by a buddy. But also for the buddy or the ambassador then it's something that they can use as evidence of additional, if you like, skills and they would put on the CV.'

Staff member

Staff emphasised the importance of volunteering opportunities as a route into employment and felt that students who choose to volunteer are aware of these benefits. Staff suggested that volunteering may also be useful in helping international students get their bearings.

The majority of student respondents did not volunteer or know of local organisations to approach for volunteering opportunities. They indicated that their HEIs did not assist them with making links between their external involvement and their course of study or employability.

UK students were marginally more aware of community organisations to contact than international students. It was also noted that international students fluent in English had higher contact or opportunities to interact with local communities. Students who had volunteered said that they had found opportunities themselves by making direct approaches to organisations, using search engines, seeing adverts and word of mouth.

'I'd like to get more involved in the local community because I feel that we are sharing the town with them and it can't just be about students. But can't say that the university has facilitated many opportunities for that. The union has been more helpful in that sense but even then there is no like formal mechanism.'

EU international undergraduate

Students who volunteer do so across a range of sectors, including faith-related (predominantly within Christian church communities), children and youth (eg, the Scouts, Duke of Edinburgh awards, Barnardos), sports and leisure (eg, in a museum, coaching a youth football team, with animal charities) health and social care (eg, Red Cross, local first aid groups, Shelter) and environmental media and cultural (eg, local orchestras, role-playing clubs, Chinese schools).

The students who engaged externally with local host communities and organisations did so for a range of reasons, such as to:

- = overcome loneliness and establish a more stable social network

'Really we need a community and because we feel very lonely and homesick as well, yeah. We do need support from local community.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

'While I am here I want this to be my town, my community.'

EU international undergraduate

- = create greater connections with local host communities as part of the international experience by getting to know the local culture, customs, local people, the language and accent

'Just to get to know the culture, the people here, like that's one part of the learning, that's why we came here. Like we have the finance education in our countries as well. There's you know global world and technology and internet and everything is there but ... still you know we come here, spend money to you know get the international exposure to get the mix.'

Non-EU international postgraduate

- = contribute to the community
- = improve the local community's opinion of students
- = enrich their CV with working experience and gain contacts
- = gain inspiration and have a more direct way to participate within the city

4.2 Sports

Team sports are a useful vehicle to assist integration, so links with external sporting clubs and organisations were viewed as important, particularly for sports and activities that are not offered within the institution's main sports services. This could be particularly useful in terms of connections to clubs that appeal to groups of international students.

One of the respondents mentioned the involvement of international students in the local cricket clubs, which appeared to be initiated independently of the HEI in this case.

'You go out on a Sunday or a Saturday, you'll see the international students. They'll have joined the local cricket club. So they are embedding themselves in the local community.'

Staff member

Further reading

- = Brown, JC and Daly, AJ (2004) *Exploring the interactions and attitudes of international and domestic students in a New Zealand tertiary institution*
eprints.utas.edu.au/6733/1/Hawaii_Justine.pdf
- = Dunne, C (2009) 'Host students' perspectives of intercultural contact in an Irish university'. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 13(2): 222–239
- = Fielden, J (2007) *Global horizons for UK universities*
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- = Hart, C, Sheehy-Skeffington, J and Charles, I (2007) *International students and local communities: a research project by HOST UK*
www.ukcisa.org.uk/files/pdf/world_views/local_communities.pdf
- = Holland, A (2008) *The integration of international students with Dutch students and the local community*
www.ukcisa.org.uk/files/pdf/pmi/osv_holland.pdf
- = Peacock, N and Harrison, N (2009) 'It's so much easier to go with what's easy: "mindfulness" and the discourse between home and international students in the United Kingdom'. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 13(4): 487–508
eprints.uwe.ac.uk/16272

= Ward C (2001) *The impact of international students on domestic students and host institutions*
[www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/
international/the_impact_of_international_students_
on_domestic_students_and_host_institutions](http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/international/the_impact_of_international_students_on_domestic_students_and_host_institutions)

4.3 Links with black and minority ethnic organisations

Staff felt that HEIs were fairly good at establishing relationships with schools, local authorities, police, third sector organisations and established businesses to benefit all students. However, there was not a consistent approach to creating relationships with relevant black and minority ethnic (BME) organisations. Some HEIs appear to conflate association with specific organisations as being synonymous with forging links with 'communities'.

'I wouldn't say [HEIs] were exceptionally good, they are reasonably good at connecting with host communities. When I say host communities it is primarily through agencies and institutions such as schools, such as the police, such as main service providers, transport and so on and so forth. I think what they are exceptionally good at is their connections with the business community. Which they often confuse with the community per se. That is what they understand by community engagement, business community.'

Staff member

Chaplaincy service respondents have a range of contacts from external faith groups; however other services lack tangible links with external BME organisations. Reliance on the chaplaincy and faith groups to signpost students to particular services not only has the potential to exclude those who do not use the chaplaincy or have a faith but also has implications for confidentiality.

Staff felt that collaboration with external agencies could provide greater specialist support for students.

'I've had some contact with the Ethnic Minorities Law Centre. I have to say they're like an excellent resource. Because there's a limit to some of the things I can advise about say immigration, which requires expertise in this area of advice. I thought we could refer people who were in serious difficulties and they could really, you know use a good immigration solicitor and get things done. I've experienced that a few times. But I think the Ethnic Minorities Law Centre as well as the Citizens Advice Bureau are hugely underrated and underappreciated.'

Staff member

'We did get a student about a year ago who came in and said ... I want to report an incidence of racism ... He said I saw the bus coming and I was running for the bus and you know the bus driver clearly saw me but he didn't stop at the bus stop. And I sort of thought right, OK. Welcome to [city name]. Racism can be something that happens to students in the street and not within the university so we need to find community ways of supporting students too.'

Staff member

Staff at one institution made contact with local Chinese community groups but found that many Chinese students were not interested in getting involved in these local groups. Staff highlighted the importance of avoiding stereotyping and treating particular groups as homogeneous.

'That everybody from China is the same ... I think that can be really problematic and work very much against ... what you're trying to do.'

Staff member

Overall what emerges from the staff interviews in this context is that there is little or no institutional awareness of BME organisations in the local area or in Scotland. Connections between HEIs and BME organisations are frequently serendipitous and largely based on individual staff awareness, knowledge and contacts rather than on a carefully considered institutional strategy.

Herriot-Watt University made connections with Saheliya, a local BME agency offering mental health and counselling services for BME women. Contact was made thanks to a senior counsellor who knew about the organisation and was keen to establish a link.

Saheliya representatives came to campus to offer some counselling slots. However, the take-up was poor and this service tailed off. Although the reasons for the lack of use of the service are unclear, it nevertheless is an example of creative practice.

Recommendations

- = Take a strategic and systematic approach to policies and processes that foster good relationships between local communities and students from diverse backgrounds. This would contribute to institutions meeting some of their obligations for promoting good relations under the Equality Act 2010.
- = Consider what formal links exist with external and community organisations that might provide support and alternative opportunities for UK as well as international students.
- = Build on initiatives that are already taking place, for example, buddy systems, placements, HOST initiatives.
- = Share ideas and strategies across the sector.
- = Consider monitoring and evaluation systems to assess impacts of initiatives on relationships between HEI and local communities and between international and UK students to help assess relationships between initiatives and their impact.
- = Explore new ways of engaging with communities in the broadest and most diverse sense such as developing strategic partnerships with BME organisations alongside 'mainstream' organisations providing services such as the Citizens Advice Bureau.
- = Invite community organisations to take part and contribute to institutional events.

5 Conclusion

This study confirms the significant role student support services play with regard to the overall student experience and satisfaction.

Being a student in higher education involves more than engaging in an academic pursuit; it is an all-encompassing life and cultural experience. Therefore, services that enable students to fulfil this wider purpose require investment as well as scrutiny.

The study found a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment from staff to enhance the student experience of both international and UK students. Some innovative and thoughtful practices have been highlighted in the report. HEIs could do more to seek out these examples of good practice within their own institution and commend these more publicly.

The report has identified recommendations for different service areas but also general areas to improve campus ethos. One key area is the need to be far more proactive in breaking down barriers between international and UK students. Another important area that HEIs need to focus on is developing wider and more active connections with external organisations and communities both from majority and minority communities. The HEI needs to take the lead in forging such links, breaking down barriers and seeking opportunities for partnerships and mutual interactions. These connections can contribute to an even more successful study experience for all students.

An area that was mentioned by students in interviews across all participating institutions but has not been captured elsewhere in this report was the lack of information on how to make a complaint. Students indicated that the procedures for making complaints, for example about service provision or reporting incidents such as racist language, were unclear. Information about complaints procedures is available at every HEI but this may need to be more clearly signposted to students. It is perhaps less clear how students can report issues of discrimination that they have experienced or witnessed.

The onus for creating a more positive student experience for all lies with the HEI and its staff.

Consideration therefore needs to be given to:

- = raising staff awareness of how to work and react in an increasingly diverse setting to explicitly address issues of prejudice and discrimination
- = continuous evaluation of whether and how services are meeting the range of student needs, including those specific to postgraduates, and have the flexibility to adapt or adjust services to meet diverse needs
- = collaborative working between support services and academic departments to avoid duplication of work and unnecessary delay in addressing student needs and concerns
- = consideration of how to inform international and UK students of what support services can offer beyond the initial information deluge at freshers' week or during induction
- = sharing practice within institutions and across the sector on how to improve support services and promote interaction and good relations
- = developing clearer links between staff working on equality and diversity and those engaged in the internationalisation agenda
- = clearly outlining how students could put forward a complaint or report a discriminatory incident that they have witnessed or experienced themselves
- = developing partnerships with external organisations, particularly those working with BME people, to enhance volunteering and employment opportunities, broaden the range of specialist support services and promote good relations
- = using data from support service evaluations to arrange consultation activities and seek feedback from international and UK students to ensure continuous improvement takes place
- = working with the students' union or association to develop a strategy for promoting good relations and mutual respect between international and UK students

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www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/international/the_impact_of_international_students_on_domestic_students_and_host_institutions

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Appendix: methodology

The research utilised a mixed methods approach which involved:

- = an online questionnaire (quantitative)
- = semi-structured interviews and discussion groups (qualitative)

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in interviews and discussion groups and all participants were provided with information on the ethical guidelines employed in the research. Desk-based research was also undertaken to inform the overall project and in particular to help shape the online questionnaire, interviews and group discussions.

Online questionnaire

The online questionnaire for students focused on the main themes identified by the project advisory group and ECU. Students who participated were entered into a prize draw for three prizes of £50 Amazon or iTunes vouchers.

Interviews and group discussions

Interviews were semi-structured, focusing on the three themes of equity of support, campus cohesion and community engagement, and lasted between one and half and two hours. Participating students were given a small cash amount as a thank you for their involvement. All interviews and groups discussions were recorded with permission from participants and transcribed in full. The transcripts were analysed using the four themes as a framework for coding data and to produce a thematic analysis focusing on services. Nine members of the project advisory group were also interviewed as they provided useful contextual information to this study.

The study sample

Staff and students were interviewed at six Scottish HEIs, chosen to reflect a reasonable balance of provision, pre- and post-1992 institutions, geographical location and potential size of international student population. ECU and the project advisory group provided advice in terms of the final six institutions selected.

Once they had agreed, each institution was contacted by a senior researcher and identified a key contact who became the link person with the project team. The researcher provided

background information about the project and clarified the requirements of the institution's involvement in the project.

The institution's contact helped to recruit staff and students for interviews and made practical arrangements (eg, circulating and promoting questionnaires, organising venues for group discussions, setting up staff interviews).

As far as possible the sampling of participants was representative in terms of roles, services, gender, age, type of study.

There was a general information leaflet for staff and one for students.

Staff

The study aimed to interview ten staff from different support services from each institution making a total of 60 interviews. However institutions were very keen to take part in the study so group and one-to-one interviews were undertaken with 71 staff members from a wide range of positions including senior managers and frontline staff across different services.

Student experience, student services	12
International related	7
Accommodation	7
Sport and exercise	6
Senior management	5
Language support	4
Registry, admissions	4
Equality and diversity	4
Counselling	3
Disability office	3
External relations, marketing, recruitment	3
Students' union or association	3
Careers	3
Academic	2
Library	2
Chaplaincy	2
Health services	1

Students: questionnaire

Students took part in an online questionnaire and group discussions. The student sample included UK, EU international and non-EU international students studying at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

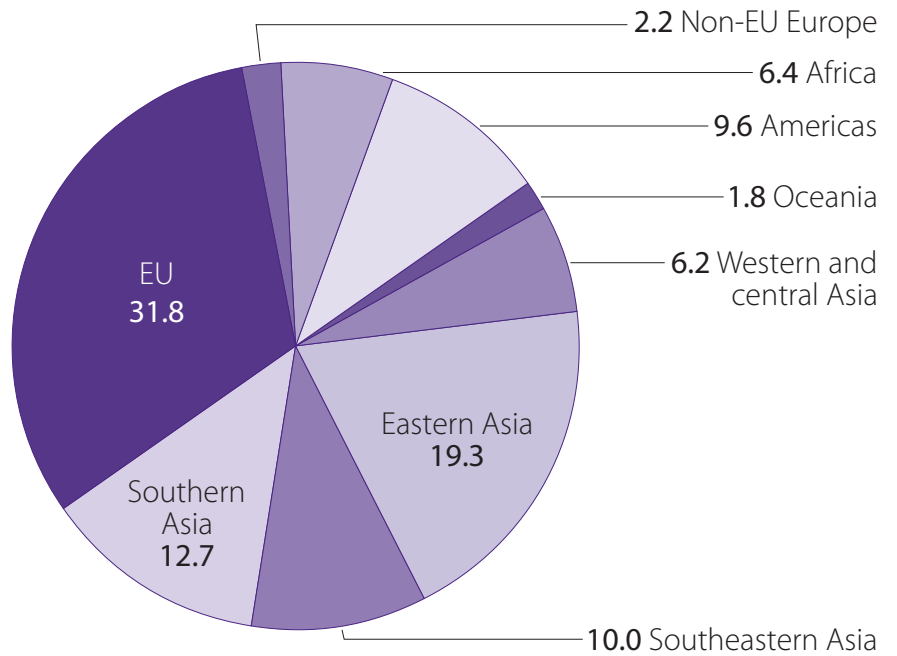
There were 965 responses from five HEIs with 748 fully completed questionnaires and 217 nearly completed questionnaires (these had some sections with missing data). Nearly 55 per cent of the online responses came from that one institution. Just over half studied arts, humanities and social subjects.

Alongside monitoring questions on age, disability, ethnicity, religion, country of origin, sexual orientation and whether they have dependants, students were asked about:

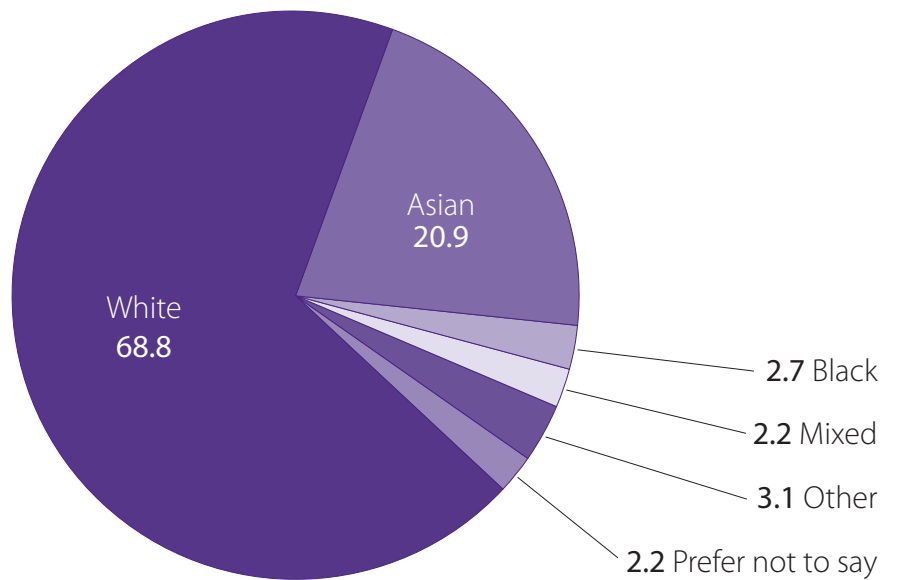
- = their level of study (undergraduate, masters, doctoral) and subject area
- = their reasons for choosing their institution
- = whether and what information on support services was provided before starting and on arrival
- = their levels of comfort to approach certain services and ability to discuss concerns
- = whether they feel there is good interaction between international and UK students and suggestions to improve interaction
- = their knowledge of, and involvement with, local community organisations

53 per cent of respondents were UK students, 31 per cent were non-EU internationals and 16 per cent EU internationals. 63 per cent of respondents were undergraduates, 23 per cent were at master's level and 14 per cent at doctoral level. The data from the questionnaire was analysed using the SPSS data program.

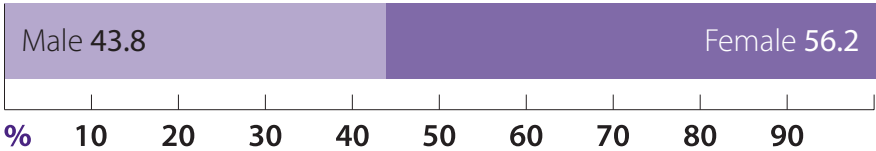
Region of origin of international survey respondents



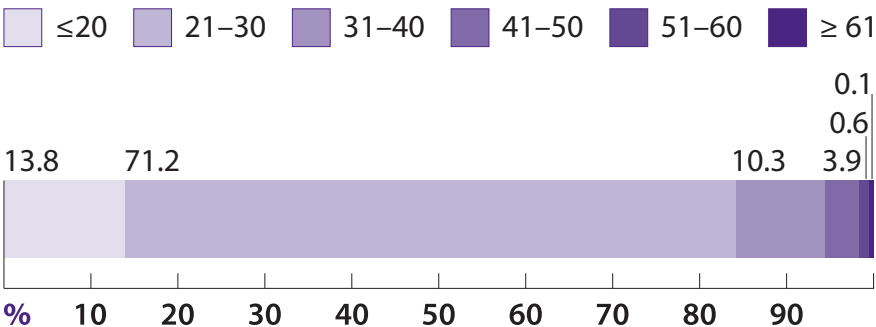
Ethnicity of survey respondents



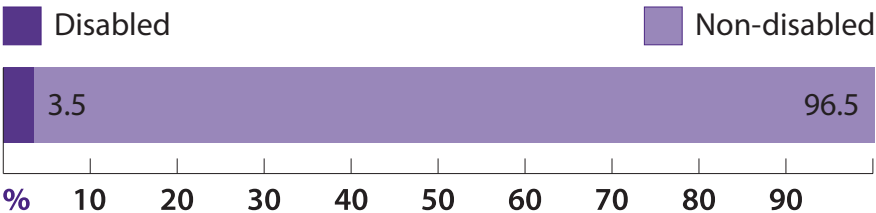
Gender of survey respondents



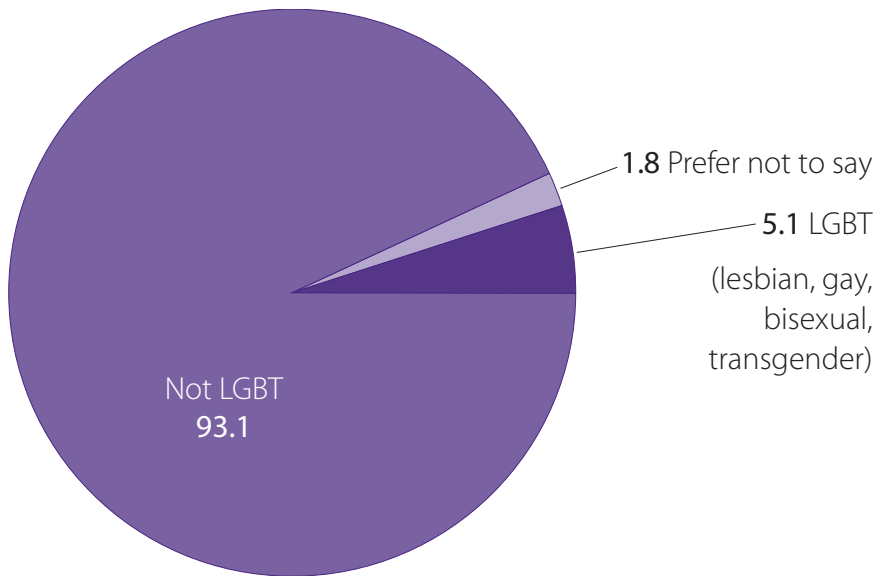
Age of survey respondents



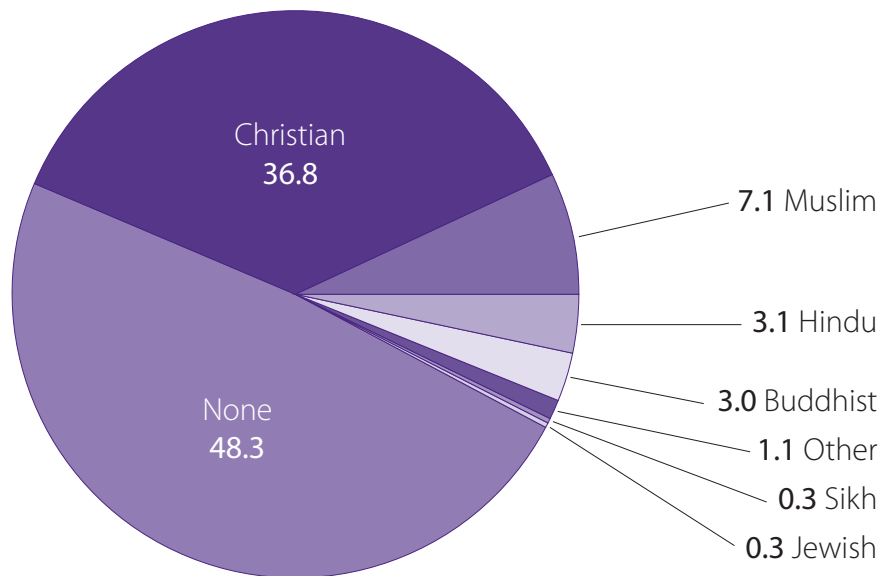
Disability status of survey respondents



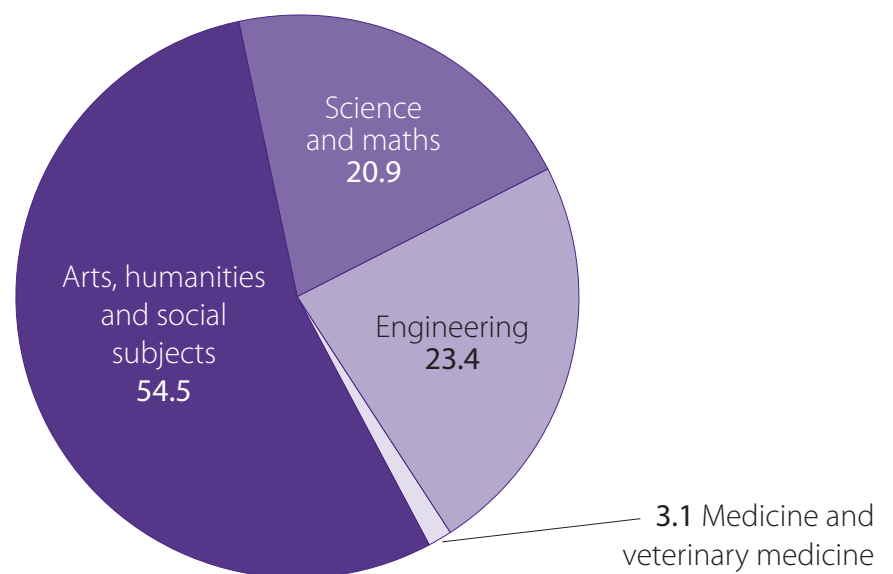
Sexual orientation of survey respondents



Religion of survey respondents



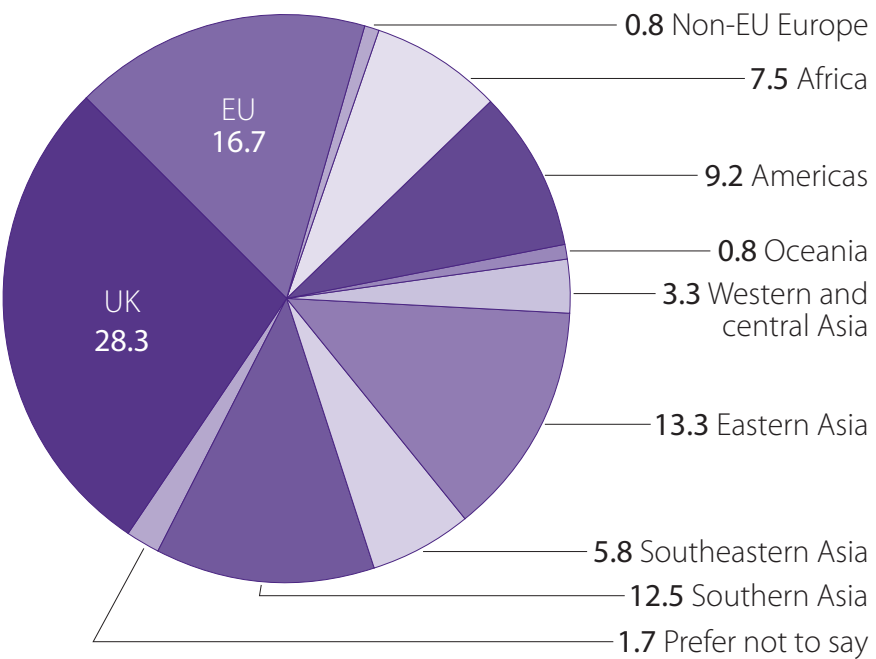
Area of study of survey respondents



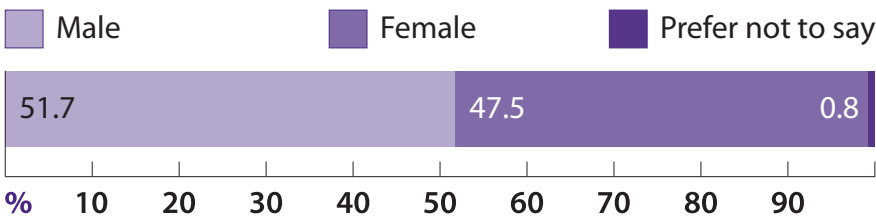
Students: group discussions

Completing the interview form was a voluntary exercise. 199 students were interviewed, but only 120 completed forms were received.

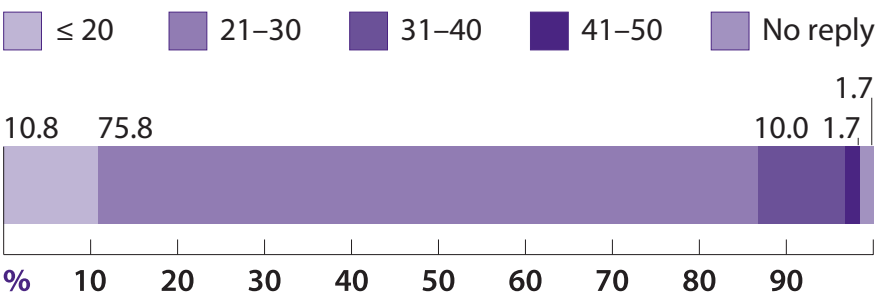
Region of origin of focus group participants

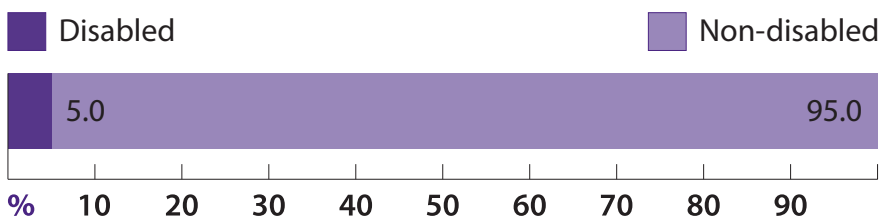
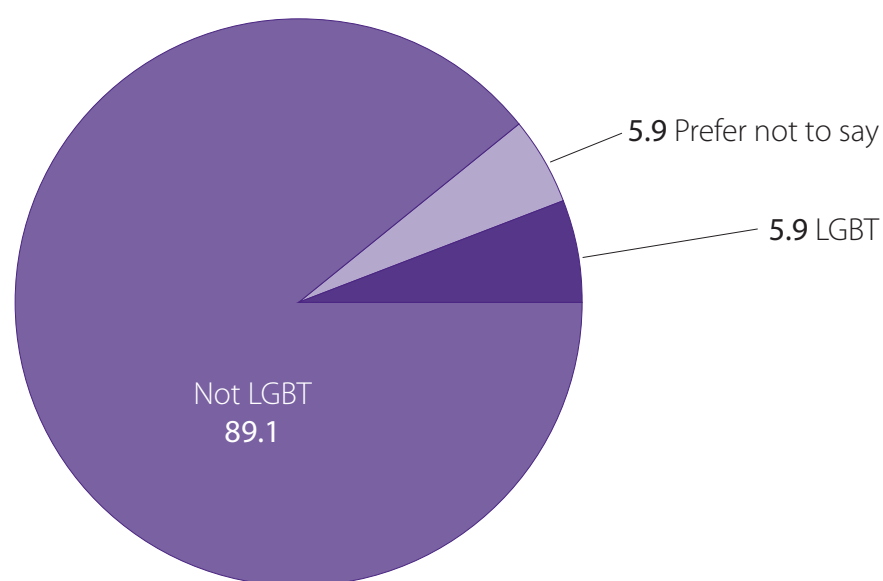
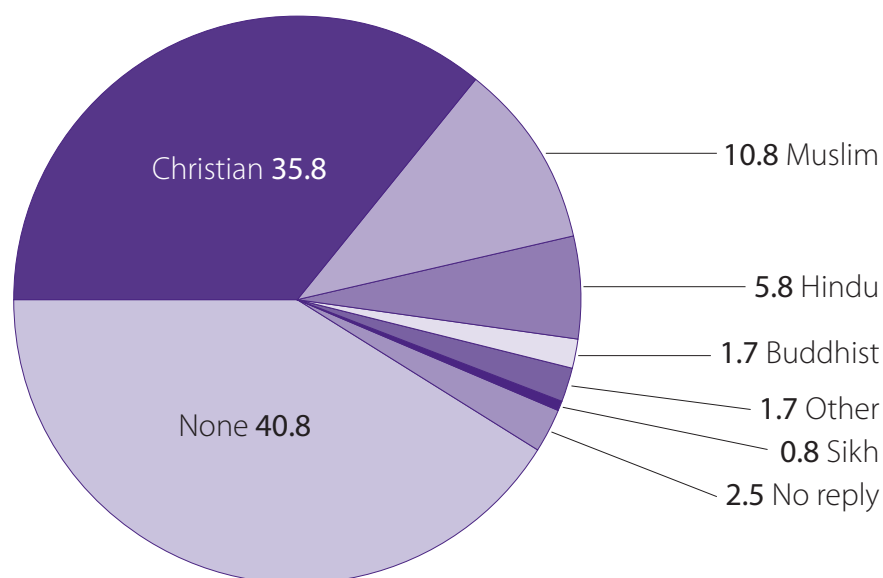


Gender of focus group participants



Age of focus group participants



Disability status of focus group participants**Sexual orientation of focus group participants****Religion of focus group participants**

Equality Challenge Unit

ECU works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and in further education in Scotland.

ECU works closely with colleges and universities to seek to ensure that staff and students are not unfairly excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged because of age, disability, gender identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, or through any combination of these characteristics or other unfair treatment.

Providing a central source of expertise, research, advice and leadership, we support institutions in building a culture that provides equality of both opportunity and outcome, promotes good relations, values the benefits of diversity and provides a model of equality for the wider UK society.



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